4
理想のヒモ生活
Tsunehiko Watanabe
渡辺恒彦
illustration
文倉十
ヒーロー文庫

Risou no Himo Seikatsu

Volume 4

Author: Watanabe Tsunehiko
Illustrator: Ayakura Juu

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Illustrations

ボナ王女は見地味だが、銀粉をまぶした栗色の髪がキラキラと輝いて見えた。
「このたびは私達のために盛大な歓迎の場を設けていただき、ありがとうございます」
フランチェスコ王子は明朗な声と豊かな表情の映える整った顔を持つ。

「すごい……これが竜弓騎兵団……」
走竜に騎乗したまま弓を構える騎兵達が、ブジョル将軍の合図と共に矢を放つ。飛来する数十本の矢が違わず群竜達の身体に突き刺さる。
「撃てッ」

「アウラ……？」
おとなしく善治郎の腕の中に
収まっていたアウラが一瞬で反転すると
あっという間に後ろ抱きの体勢から、
✳騎乗位体勢（マウントポジション）
へと移行したのである。
腹上で微笑む妻を見上げる善治郎は
パチクリと瞬きをする。
異世界ニート生活

Prologue: The Journey of the Prince and Princess

The Carpa Kingdom was a large country reigning supreme over the western part of the South Continent, also known as the Landlion Continent.

Due to the conditions regarding location, goods in the western part of the kingdom were mainly circulated “by sea” and in the eastern part “by land”.

Of course that was nothing but a rough partition and the western part had plenty of land routes as well. Likewise, the eastern part transported goods by sea, namely across rivers, too.

Generally speaking however, more money and effort had been invested into the land routes in the eastern part of the kingdom in comparison to the ones in the western part.

Amongst the various countries on the southern continent, the Carpa Kingdom enjoyed a good reputation for their well-maintained routes in its eastern region. And an impressive convey with a large dragon carriage, drawn by eight dragons, at its centre, was slowly proceeding on such a route.

The two young royalties from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, were guarded by three hundred soldiers from the royal army of the Twin Kingdom. Right now they were temporarily resting on the grassland beside the road.

It was easy to understand that they chose this place intentionally for a break, seeing as a river was careering along not far away.

Although it was a bit of a detour, they had to move from watering place to watering place. Otherwise they wouldn’t have enough drinking water for the travellers and dragons. For that reason, roads remote from villages were deliberately zigzagged, so that they were bordering upon water sources on the way.

The Raptorial Dragons pulling the carriage were currently untied from it and greedily drinking from the river together with the Raptorial Dragons of the knights.

In the meantime, the knights were standing sentinel over their surroundings. The river could house the freshwater Water Dragons, crocodiles or carnivorous fishes. And just as likely was it that wild carnivorous dragons hunted in this area.

Having said that, this region was grassland as far as the eye could see, without any places to hide, and the water in the river was quite clear, too, so it was easy to spot any enemies within it. So the knights on watch, too, were standing there relatively relaxed and petted the necks of the drinking Raptorial Dragons in appreciation for their efforts on the road.

It was a relaxed atmosphere, albeit with a reasonable caution.

Then the door of the large carriage opened and a single silhouette appeared.

“Fuh… Good job, everyone. Oh man, my shoulders are so stiff.”

The young man, getting off the carriage, said that in a tone that was somewhat inappropriate for his status and rolled his shoulders as to underline his words.

“Please forgive the inconveniences, Prince Francesco. We will pause here for a moment to let the dragons drink, so please unwind yourself outside in the meantime.”

“Okay, will do. I’ll leave the schedule up to you, so do as you see fit.”

The young man with blonde hair, green eyes and oldest son of the crown prince of the Sharrow Family, Francesco, replied with a refreshing smile to the middle aged knight that acted as the commander of the guards.

Both, his behaviour and words, were not exactly lacking the dignity of a royalty, but it still got across as somewhat “easy-going”. As a matter of fact, the nearby knights were no more tense than

necessary, even in the presence of one of the prominent figures of their country, namely the oldest son of the next king, which definitely was attributed to this very character of Prince Francesco.

His handsome, slender face always showed an amiable smile, so he appeared younger that he actually was.

However, it clearly revealed him as a born royalty how he “naturally” accepted all the nearby knights standing on guard at a distance.

Under to protection of numerous knights, Prince Francesco casually walked around with an extremely laid-back expression and eased his body that had become all stiff from the long ride in the carriage.

“Prince Francesco.”

Suddenly the voice of a woman came from behind the prince.

When Prince Francesco turned around, he saw a familiar girl and said with a brighter smile.

“Hey, Bona. I see you left the carriage, too. Good call. The western area of the continent is so much hotter, and accordingly sultrier, than the central area, but near the water it’s definitely refreshing. Here, feel the nice breeze.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you for the advice, Prince.”

The young woman, nodding a bit surprised in response to Prince Francesco’s words, was Princess Bona.

Like Prince Francesco, she, too, was a member of the Sharrow Royal Family.

Nevertheless it would stretch a point to group Prince Francesco, a legitimate grandson of the current king, and Princess Bona, a lower rank noblewoman that was only put into the royal family because she atavistically awakened to the ‘Bestowal Magic’, together as the same “royalty”.

In fact, her attitude towards Prince Francesco was closer to that of

an aristocrat consulting a royalty rather than that of an equal member of the royal family.

Their difference in authority was represented in all kind of things. For example, the dragon carriage of Prince Francesco was large and drawn by eight dragons, whereas the dragon carriage of Priness Bona was one size smaller and drawn by six dragons.

However, despite the obvious differences, Princess Bona was an unmistakable member of the royal family. In terms of social standing, she was very clearly distinguishable from the escorting knights and much more closer to Prince Francesco.

Therefore it was none other than her role to point out “that” right now.

“Excuse me, Prince Francesco, but did you put on these clothes by yourself?”

Her question implied a meaning obvious to any hearer, but Prince Francesco didn’t seem to notice it at all and answered cheerfully.

“Oh, you noticed. As you know, we have far less waiting maids with us than in the royal palace. I don’t want to bother them all too much, so I usually do what I can on my own.”

The prince declared it so proudly that you practically could hear the nuance: “Quite considerate of me, isn’t it? Go on and praise me.”

Seeing him like that made Princess Bona feel rather guilty for some reason. But she still had to mention it, because she was the only person present that could speak openly with him without causing societal problems.

Princess Bona cleared her throat determined with an affected cough and then

“Prince, you are wearing two different kind of socks.”

she stated the fact as straightforward as possible.

“Eh? Ah, you’re right.”

The surprised Prince Francesco looked at his own feet and saw exactly what Princess Bona had pointed out: He was wearing different socks on each foot, a red sock on the right and a blue sock on the left.

“Ahaha, now that’s really something. Thanks for telling me, Bona. You spared me an embarrassment.”

The prince thanked the young princess with a smile for pointing out his mistake.

“No problem. I may be speaking out of turn, but I suggest you return to your carriage and change your socks.”

While replying like that, Princess Bona internally heaved a sigh of relief.

(Good, he will “listen to reason” from my side after all.)

Some people would feel offended and perceive it as “compromising” when you gave them a correct advise for their own sake. Fortunately for everyone involved, Prince Francesco was not that narrow-minded. However, there was a different problematic issue with the prince.

“Mh? But since I’m wearing one red and blue sock each right now, doesn’t that mean there’s one red and blue sock each left in the carriage as well? So when I go back and change them, wouldn’t I end up with a blue sock on my right foot and a red sock on my left foot?”

(The problem is… he somewhat lacks the “brains to understand” my words.)

Princess Bona couldn’t help feeling a dull pain around her temples when she heard the words of the prince, who was around eight years older than her.

She remembered the words that Prince Francesco’s father, the crown prince, and his grandfather, the current king, entrusted her with at the royal palace.

“Please take care of him.” Not in her wildest dreams, she would have expected these words to literally mean “babysitting”.

Their journey was an official visit abroad, the first one for the Sharrow Family after a couple of dozen decades. Moreover, their destination was the Carpa Kingdom, the leader in the west with whom the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell wanted to avoid a direct confrontation.

So, what was the Sharrow Family thinking for sending her, the lowest of the lowest-ranking within the family, and a prince, who was nearly dead from the neck up, as the important emissaries?

(His Majesty and His Highness the Crown Prince are both sagacious personalities. There has to be some kind of reason for sending Prince Francesco…)

She had hoped to be told about that reason, if possible, but that was nothing but wishful thinking for a royal member at the bottom of the food chain.

If she had known beforehand that it would turn out like that, she would have never competed for this delegation…

(…No, in the end, I still would have competed for it after careful deliberation.)

As she never lied to herself, she came to such a conclusion.

Her fate might have been decided from the moment on, when she saw the diamond rings that Princess Isabelle from the Jilbell Family had brought back with her.

The three embedded diamonds were perfectly uniform in size and shape, and the fine and precise lines engraved in the socket were simply captivating.

The rings were exquisite enough to fascinate someone, who was aiming to be a jeweller.

By nature, those of the Sharrow Family, who were on the low-end in the line of succession, often tried their hand at creating jewellery

or armaments in order to stand on one's own feet as a maker of magic tools. And Princess Bona was no exception. She was already recognized as a full-fledged jeweller at her young age.

(In the end, I could not take part in turning these rings into magic tools, but when I go to the Carpa Kingdom and get close to Her Highness Aura and her husband…)

She had announced her intention to be part of this delegation with that kind of ambition, which was a bit too endearing to be an ulterior motive.

Anyway, now that the current king and crown prince were "counting on" her, she no longer had a choice but to do her best to meet their expectations.

"Prince, there is no need to change both socks. Just switch one of either socks and you will have matching colours on both feet."

"Ah, right! That's what they call thinking outside the box, I guess. Not bad, Bona. You've a flexible way of thinking."

"…You honour me."

The young princess fought the dull pain in her head while she already started to regret her own decision.

* * *

A few days later.

Aura was looking through various documents in her office in the royal palace when a message from the fortress on the eastern border reached her per small flying dragon just as the sun had started to set.

"…I see. They have finally arrived."

'Delegation from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell arrived at the eastern border station. The emissaries are Prince Francesco and Princess Bona.

Scheduled to proceed after a few days of rest at the fortress. One thousand knights from the fortress will accompany them as an escort.'

Once she had read the written message briefly, she heaved a sigh.

Their visit had been known to her for a while now and she admitted that it wasn't all bad news. However, Aura could anticipate the troubles that came along with important matters, thus the sigh.

Even so, she couldn't just leave it at a sigh as a ruler of a country.

"Fabio. How are the preparations for their reception going?"

Sitting on her chair and keeping her gaze on the documents on her desk, Aura called out to her secretary, who stood at an angle behind her.

"Yes, it is going smoothly. We have made three buildings available in the southern wing of the royal palace and the personnel has been assembled according to your instructions as well."

The middle-aged man with the slender face, Secretary Fabio, replied with a flat tone as always.

"Three? Will that be enough? We are talking about two royalties of a major power here."

Aura, raising an eyebrow, turned only her head backwards, whereupon her secretary responded indifferently.

"Yes. They seem to have less attendants with them than we anticipated at first, so I believe it will suffice. You can only get to the first and second building through the third building, so when we place His Highness Prince Francesco in the first building, Her Highness Princess Bona in the second building and the escorting knights in the third building, they should have not much to complain about from their end, either."

"Hmm…"

Deeming it necessary to verify things in detail, Aura beckoned him

to come closer and posed her question.

“What about their arms? As knights from the Twin Kingdom and moreover, under the direct control of the Sharrow Royal Family, it is more than likely than everyone is equipped with ‘magic tools’ fit for action.”

“I definitely agree with that. We certainly cannot allow the unrestrained possessions of combat-ready magic tools within the royal palace. However, they have to protect two royalty with a limited number of people. I doubt they will hand over their magic tools even when we ask them to.”

“I will appoint ‘extraterritorial rights’ to the three buildings given to the delegation and permit all armaments there. And they may only leave with protective magic tools after ascertaining their abilities and getting our permission.”

In reaction to Aura’s proposal, her secretary noted reaffirming.

“Does that mean that average armaments, namely non magic tools, will be allowed in the royal palace without limitations?”

“Not without any limitations at all, but we will have to compromise to some degree.”

“I can already see our nobles protesting, though.”

“What do you expect me to do? It is not like I can tell them to guard the direct royalty without weapons.”

Answering him, Aura once again heaved a deep sigh.

Even if under limitations, armed foreigners would be let into the royal palace. It definitely wasn’t a welcomed situation, but they couldn’t simply turn them down either, considering the future.

In the near future, Zenjirou wanted to go to the royal palace of the Twin Kingdom after learning how to use “Teleport”. If they forcefully disarmed the guards of Prince Francesco and Princess Bona now, the odds were that they would demand the same of Zenjirou’s guards when he went over there.

Nevertheless, the delegation was coming over “uninvited” for their own convenience, so the Carpa Kingdom would lose its face when they conceded everything to them.

“Mh…”

Aura crossed her legs under her long, red dress with a side slit and pondered. As her secretary had been serving her for years, he seemed to read her thoughts from her face

“In that case, how about we charge them a fee for every weapon or magic item they bring in? If the matter can be solved with money, I am sure they will not refuse either.”

and suggested this.

But the Queen knitted her brows deeper upon his proposal and shook her head,

“To be honest, that sounds appealing, but no. I do not want to establish the precedent of bringing weapons into the royal palace in exchange for money.”

“Then how about having them arrange some kind of ‘magic tool’ instead? That is a compensation only the royalty of the Twin Kingdom can pay, so it will hardly become an exploitable ‘precedent’.”

“…That works, I guess. Then I have to consider what kind of magic tool I will request.”

“I am sure you know this already, but the resulting aftermath of a Space-Time magic tool is just as tremendous as its benefit.”

Turning the “Space-Time Magic”, which originally could only be used by the royal family of the Carpa Kingdom, into a magic tool meant that even people outside the royal family could use that magic. At the present time, Aura was the only practitioner of the Space-Time magic, so a magic tool with her magic would be a huge advantage to the Carpa Kingdom, but giving the magic a shape in form of a magic tool also meant that it could fall into the hands of other countries in the future.

“‘Teleport’ is out of the question, but even for other Space-Time magic it would be safer to make them into ‘disposable’ magic tools, if anything…”

At some point, Aura had started to count the chicken before they are hatched and when she noticed what she was doing, she cleared her throat with a cough and got back on topic.

“Well, in any case, working out the fine details will have to wait until they arrive here. Enough about quarters and armaments for now. You have enough personnel, I take it?”

Her topic change came out of nowhere, but her secretary was used to it, so he replied without any hesitation at all.

“Yes. Per your instructions, we have enlisted especially the young waiting maids from lower noble or wealthy common families, who have adequate looks and skills so as not to embarrass us in front of the foreign royalty.”

They had picked women of relatively low status out of consideration for the Twin Kingdom. Both, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, would only bring a bare minimum of attendants with them from the Twin Kingdom.

The attendants provided by the Carpa Kingdom were just temporary staff. Now, if they were way older or of higher status than the waiting maids from the Twin Kingdom, it would complicate the command structure.

“Good. But it will not affect their departments when we withdraw them, will it?”

“Rest assured. The royal palace has a certain surplus of staff to begin with and we can always ‘temporarily reinstate’ some retired maids if necessary.”

“Very well.”

After hearing his full explanation, Aura nodded briefly.

The preparations for the reception seemed to be going well. Once

the two royalty arrived, it might very well be possible to encounter some unforeseen shortcomings, but elaborating further than this was the job of the people in the field, and not something the Queen of a country should directly involve herself with.

As the Queen was pleased by his answer, the secretary now asked her a question himself.

“Well then, what about Zenjirou-sama in the Inner Palace? He would at least have to attend the welcome party.”

Right now, Zenjirou was still learning etiquette in the inner palace.

In the past year, he had acquired the manner of speaking for conversing with the native nobles to some extent, but teaching the etiquette for dealing with someone of nearly equal status, namely foreign royalty, had been postponed. Of course he had started to study the social intercourse between royalty as soon as the diplomat of the Twin Kingdom had informally notified them about the visit from the Sharrow Royalty, but it was far from perfect yet.

Aura felt a sting of guilt in her chest when she thought about how she had to throw her husband onto the stage with superficial knowledge, and responded with an odd flat tone.

“Lady Octavia assured me that he has learned enough to get through it in one piece as long as nothing ’unexpected’ happens.”

As expected, the middle-aged secretary twisted the mouth a bit when he heard the vague answer from Aura.

“Oho, as long as nothing ‘unexpected’ happens, you say?”

“…Leave it be, Fabio.”

She reprimanded him, but her words kind of lacked strength again. Well, it was only natural.

The Sharrow Royal Family had broken a decades-long taciturnity and was visiting a foreign country.

Conceivable goals were Zenjirou’s glass marbles and his blood line.

Moreover, the visiting royalty were a prince obviously fraught with problems, since he still hadn't a claim on the throne after more than twenty years even though he was the legitimate grandson of the current king with a perfect lineage, and a young princess at just the right age for marriage.

Taking all these factors into account, Aura herself believed not one bit that "nothing unexpected" would happen.

Chapter 01: The Queen, the Prince Consort, the Prince and the Princess

The early afternoon on a certain day.

An unusual atmosphere hung over the “audience room”, which could be considered the centre of the royal palace of the Carpa Kingdom.

Queen Aura sat on her throne and various officials, in charge of the civil and military affairs in the Carpa Kingdom, stood at the lower end, showing a mixed expression of nervousness and curiosity.

You could very well call this an abnormal situation. All the present nobles were above a certain rank, namely important mainstays of the county.

It was extremely rare that these noblemen, up to all the dodges, would reveal their “nervousness” and even rarer that they couldn’t hide their “curiosity”.

However, it would be a bit unfair to call them “careless” for it. After all, they currently faced a situation that was compelling “nervousness” and stimulating “curiosity”.

A prince and a princess from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell were visiting.

That fact was significant enough to make the nobles of the Carpa Kingdom, a major power, lose their composure.

Just as the Carpa Kingdom was the leader of the western part on South Continent, the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell was ruling supreme over the central area of the South Continent.

Moreover, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona were members of the “Sharrow Royal Family”. Unlike the members of the Jilbell Royal

Family, who frequently visited other countries in demand of their "Healing Magic", the Sharrow Royal Family, practitioners of the "Bestowal Magic", basically never left their country.

At the very least, they hadn't made any official visits abroad in the last century. So it was no wonder that the noblemen, usually experts at controlling their expressions and ways of speaking, would be unable to hide their curiosity when the royalty wrapped in such mysteries suddenly came over for a visit.

As they stood below the throne, the noblemen faithfully kept their facial expression in check, but even then, they couldn't suppress the tint of curiosity from showing in their eyes while they gazed upon the still closed double door.

(I have heard rumours, but to think that they would really come…)

(It's quite the surprise. I wonder what their aim is?)

(Who knows. Officially it is labelled as a "friendly visit".)

(That's obviously just an excuse. But either way…)

(Yes, there will be a stir for a while.)

If their whispered words as they stood faithfully at attention, were to reach Aura's ears, she would probably heave a sigh of relief.

As a matter of fact, the "gossip" of the noblemen didn't include any information that paid attention to the true aim of the visit from Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, such as Zenjirou inheriting the Sharrow blood or his glass marbles having a high chance at being a medium for the "Bestowal Magic".

For now, the censorship was working as expected.

In the meantime, the double door was pushed open with a deep tone and a pair of a man and a women entered the audience room.

(Oho, so they are…)

(Prince Francesco and Princess Bona…)

With all the eyes of the nobles set on them from left and right, the young prince and princess of the Sharrow Royal Family, dressed in the formal purple garbs, advanced gracefully on the red carpet.

Behind them followed numerous knights clad in leather armour and a long sword at their waist.

Main armaments like bows or spears, let alone magic tools for combat, weren't allowed in here, but judging by their natural, yet cautious manner of walking, it was apparent that they could execute deadly precision even with a single word.

They weren't the Imperial Guards from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell, the ruler of the central area on the South Continent, for show. The delegation of the Twin Kingdom made their way to in front of the throne and halted there while the military officers gave them looks of admiration and alertness.

"….."

Sitting on her throne, Aura silently looked at the prince and princess from the foreign country standing below her.

(Now, they are the prince and princess from the Twin Kingdom, huh? Their magical power certainly is royal class.)

She watched the magical power rising from the bodies of Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, and muttered that to herself.

Princess Bona's magical power was slightly inferior to Aura's husband Zenjirou, who was sitting almost next to her, but Prince Francesco had almost twice as much as him.

Amongst the royalty of a major power that was an extraordinary amount. He even had far more than Aura, who prided herself on having a top class magical power for a royalty.

(Hmm, this proves that Prince Francesco is the legitimate grandson of the current king and Princess Bona an atavistic royalty. But that makes it even less comprehensible. Why does a direct royal descendant have no claim on the throne when he got this much magical power…?)

The eldest son of the crown prince had come of age, was in perfect health judging by appearance and possessed an extraordinary amount of magical power for a royalty.

It was extremely unnatural that he hadn't gotten a claim on the throne with these conditions.

(I guess there has to be some kind of issue with his personality?)

Wary once again, Aura spoke with a clear voice from her throne without voicing any of her inner thoughts.

"I am Queen Aura of the Carpa Kingdom. You have come a long way. I hereby welcome you in my palace. Please make yourself at home."

The spoken words and assumed conduct were more or less predetermined for this kind of official event. But Prince Francesco's behaviour betrayed Aura's expectations for a bit.

"My name is Francesco. I am the first son of Giuseppe, the crown prince of the Sharrow Family. You have my deepest gratitude for your hospitality."

Prince Francesco phoned in the predetermined words with a smooth tone and deeply "lowered his head" in a flowing motion.

It was one thing when an average member of the royal family did so, but a crown prince, who was destined to assume the throne next up, or his eldest son would be "kings in the future", so they would never lower their heads, not even to the ruler of a foreign country.

In the exchange between a Queen and a Prince, some humility in his way of speaking and so on, was obviously in order, but "lowering his head" was definitely out of the question.

In fact, the noblemen, filling the room to capacity, showed surprise by whispering secretly.

On the other hand, each and every knight from the Twin Kingdom, standing at attention behind Prince Francesco, kept a straight face without even batting an eye.

(I see. His behaviour is nothing unusual to them. For now, that means it was no random line of action for him.)

Put another way, it meant that everyone in the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell knew that “Prince Francesco would not accede to the throne”.

“My name is Bona, likewise from the Sharrow Family. It is a great honour to be given the opportunity to meet your Gracious Highness…”

Thereafter, Princess Bona, standing next to Prince Francesco, lowered her head even deeper than him and spoke words in accordance with etiquette with a tense voice, but Aura was only listening with half an ear and was rather thinking about Prince Francesco.

(Just what keeps him from getting a claim on the throne? His personality after all? But he has at least enough prudence to make it through a formal verbal exchange….)

On the surface, Aura kept a straight face, but behind the mask, she was wracking her brains about possible occurrences in the future.

* * *

It was an unwritten rule that the higher your status, the later you appeared at an evening party, usually held in the royal palace.

As the “host” of the evening party, you were allowed to put on airs for a bit, but when the host happened to be from the royal family, you no longer had a choice but to appear as the very last.

Needles to say, the royalty couldn’t be punished for going against it, as it was no fixed offence, but they would incur the enmity of the nobles, who attended later than them, in the end, so they should avoid doing so unless there was a solid ground.

And the “welcome party for Prince Francesco and Princess Bona” in the royal palace this evening was hosted by the Royal Carpa Family.

Consequently, Queen Aura and her Prince Consort Zenjirou, both

members of the royal family, had to show up last, because they were the hosts.

However, this world had no “accurate mechanical clocks” like modern Earth. During the day, they could rely on a sundial, but at night, everyone had to rely on its own biological clock alone.

As a result, Aura and Zenjirou had to waste time in the waiting room next to the ballroom until all anticipated guest for tonight had arrived.

“Puh… So boring.”

Zenjirou sat on the cushioned couch in the dimly lit waiting room as he inadvertently spoke his mind openly.

At the beginning, when he had entered the waiting room, he had been a nervous wreck due to the fact that he would have to speak with the prince and princess of the Twin Kingdom, but after more than one hour, not even that nervousness could last.

“ Phew…. Oh, whoops, I nearly crumpled my clothes.”

As the tension left his body, he unconsciously was about to slump into the couch, but recalled his attire and corrected his sitting position.

Tonight, he was flamboyantly dressed in the red native dress of the Carpa Kingdom. The third formal dress, which he wore at the moment, was more likeable than his first formal dress, which he had worn at the “welcome ceremony” a few days ago, but it was far from being comfortable, either.

“Zenjirou, you can take off some clothes if you are uncomfortable. I think it will still take some time until it is our turn.”

Sitting across from him, Aura said that, but his personality was a bit too diligent to take her up on the offer.

The third formal dress, clothing his body right now, consisted of a garment that overlapped at the front like Japanese clothes, and was held together with a strap around the waist. Over it he wore

something like a vest.

As pathetic it may sound, Zenjirou had no confidence that he would be able to put back on his clothes properly if he were to take some off now, and he would feel guilty to trouble the busy waiting maids at the last minute.

“Nah, I’ll do without it. We might be called on any minute now anyway.”

Therefore, he shook his head with these words.

It definitely was boring to wait in silence, but he could do without creating an unnecessary panic for doing something rash. As he was bad at improvising to begin with, Zenjirou wanted to avoid unexpected situation as much as possible.

“Still, I’ve got to say it’s quite dark here…”

Commenting about that only now, he glared at the oil pan standing tall next to the table while he remained seated in a well-mannered position.

The ballroom was relatively well illuminated by a good many of candles on magnificent chandeliers, but that wasn’t the case for this waiting room.

The light of the four oil pans standing around the two couches facing each other, couldn’t be called bright even as a compliment. He could only make out the silhouette of his wife sitting on the other couch, her facial features were completely in the dark.

At that moment, Aura’s face was suddenly lit up from below.

When he noticed that Aura was fiddling with something in her hands on her lap as she sat on the couch, Zenjirou immediately knew where the light was coming from.

“Oh? You brought it with you even here?”

She skilfully handled the “portable music player” in her hands. Originally, Zenjirou had used it to distract himself when he

commuted between home and work on the train.

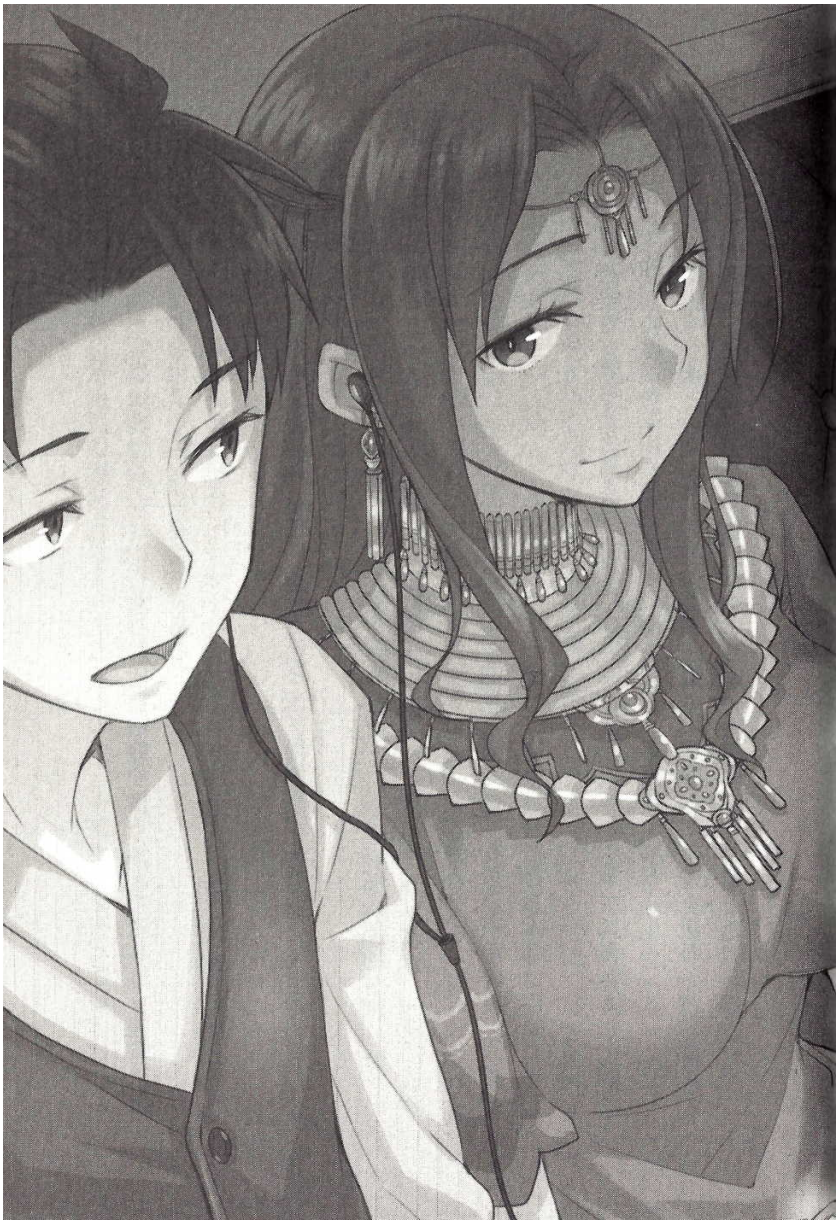
Nowadays music players had so many functions that there were called “smart phones without a call function”, but the one in Zenjirou’s possession was nothing so high-tech. It was a small device with limited functions. Despite its small size, it still had somewhat of a display, so it wasn’t impossible to watch videos per se, but in practice, it was rather exclusive to music.

“Yes, to kill some time. Do you want to listen as well?”

In the past year, she had become perfectly accustomed to it, so she operated the music player with practised hand movements, then she removed one earphone and patted on the couch beside her with her hand.

“Mm, why not.”

As he had too much time on his hands anyway, he had no reason to decline, so he obediently sat down on the right side of his wife and plugged the earphone in his left ear.



The portable music player had loud speakers, too, so they would be able to listen to the music without sitting next to each other when they just unplugged the earphones, but the two of them basically refrained from using his brought tools openly outside the inner palace.

Besides, sitting shoulder to shoulder and sharing one earphone to enjoy the same music wasn't all too bad.

A bright piano melody came from the earphone in his left ear.

"Ugh, a classical piano track."

Zenjirou moaned somewhat disappointed.

The song Aura was playing was classical music, which Zenjirou had bought in a batch during a sale of "hundred yen for everything you can stuff into one bag" at a CD shop at one time.

He vaguely remembered that the covers were saying something like "Pollini's Full Collection" or "Chopin Nocturnes", but wasn't too sure anymore, since he had thrown away the CDs right after copying them onto his computer.

Now it was a bit saddening that his wife preferred this kind of melody that he had no attachment to, over his favourite pop music.

"Hmm, my country has music as well, and there are a lot of first-rate musician employed in the royal palace, but there is nothing that comes close to this so-called piano instrument. It has a really pleasant tone."

Out of the diverse music collection that Zenijirou had brought with him, Aura liked the track with the classical piano solo the best, and she showed a smile while she said that.

The traditional instruments of the Carpa Kingdom principally belonged to three types: percussion, stringed or wind.

The lack of know-how made it impossible to build a piano, of course, but "keyboard percussion instruments" such as the xylophone or metallophone didn't exist here, either. Due to that, a piano recital must have sounded novel to her.

In contrast, the songs from Zenjirou's favourite band seemingly went beyond a novel feeling and Aura couldn't keep up with it, so she didn't really like them. Though it might have been a more simple issue, namely preferring a simple instrumental recital over a

song with incomprehensible lyrics from another world.

Anyway, even the music of a genre he didn't really like, was good enough to relieve his boredom while he waited.

"You sure love your piano songs, Aura. Reminds me, Zenkichi seems to be in a better mood, too, when classical music is running in his room."

The Queen somehow or other caught the mumbled words of her husband with her earphone-less right ear and grinned triumphantly.

"Yes. It seems Carlos has gotten his taste from me. Fufufu."

Saying so, she gave her husband, sitting next to her, a provocative look.

Even the usually intimate royal couple would turn against each other when it came to their child.

"Grr… N- No, it's okay. I still have a lot of good songs on my computer. The jury is still out. Not to forget, I got some ballads, too."

Zenjirou, still seated next to Aura, clenched his fists irmly in his lap.

"Oho, now that sounds interesting. I would like to see you try. Well, you will not get Carlos to listen to the songs of your homeland until he has learned the language anyway."

"Oh yeah, that's right! B- But I can still turn the tables afterwards. I'll definitely get even with you."

"Ahahha, just go and try it, Papa. Remember though that Carlos will leave the inner palace in five years."

Even a direct royalty was no exception to the ban of males in the inner palace. The only exceptions were the King, the master of the inner palace, (though in Zenjirou's case, he was the Prince Consort and not the King) and an infant under five years, because it was treated as genderless.

“Ugg…”

An array of challenging words and a response putting up a fight. Contrary to the content however, their voices and expressions revealed that they were enjoying their little argument.

“Ehm, the increased tempo seems to be the problem, so I should focus on ballads as they’re close to a cappella. No, wait. I think I’ve got a few instrumental bands, too? These I could play even now….”

“Even though you know that you stand no chance, you still thrown down the gauntlet. I like that.”

Sitting shoulder to shoulder and sharing an earphone to hear music, the married couple continued their casual exchange until the waiting maid of the royal palace came to get them.

* * *

“Now entering, Her Majesty Queen Aura and Zenjirou-sama!”

While their names were called out loudly and everyone’s attention shifted towards them, Zenjirou took the hand of his beloved wife and advanced unhurried.

The ballroom for the evening party was illuminated by the flames of the candles burning on the tall candle holders standing in an orderly line, and the numerous chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

Seen individually, they weren’t much of a light source, but all of them together lighted up the ballroom to a level that deserved to be called “bright”.

Naturally, that brightness didn’t come close to the one in the living room of the inner palace, where the LED floors lamps were at work, but compared to the waiting room they had been inside until now, it was almost dazzling.

As he squinted to the sparkling of the chandeliers, made out of silver and crystal, Zenjirou wryly smiled to himself, since he wasn’t as disturbed as all the eyes set on him ought to make him.

(Guess I've gotten a bit used to it after the nth time.)

More than one year had already passed, since he had married Aura, so he had made plenty of appearances at such events.

At first, he had a hard time even walking straight, but right now, he merely registered their glances at the back of his mind.

"Getting used" to something too much could lead to "carelessness", so it was not necessarily a good thing, but it was fair to say that he had improved his first appearance, where he was too nervous and needed to lean on his wife to walk.

(Let's see, I've to call out to the main guests first.)

While feeling Aura's warm touch on his right arm, Zenjirou looked around the hall in search for his first targets to greet.

(Oh, there they are.)

He spotted his targets effortless. If anything, they were coming his way for a greeting, since the entrance of the Queen and Zenjirou had been announced with a loud voice.

Aura and Zenjirou stopped on the red carpet and awaited the quickly approaching pair.

The man with blonde hair seemed to be the same age as Zenjirou, whereas the girl with auburn hair looked not older than twenty.

The men and women, standing in the hall, made way for the guests of honour to pass.

Before long, the pair arrived in front of them and the blonde man spoke first as their representative.

"Your Majesty Aura, Your Majesty Zenjirou, let me express my deepest gratitude for arranging such a splendid welcome for us tonight."

After saying that, the man with blonde hair made such an exaggerated bow that it looked pompous.

“You have my deepmost gratitude as well, Your Majesty Aura, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

Following, the girl with the auburn hair, standing at an angle behind the man, expressed her gratitude and politely lowered her head, too.

Strictly speaking, it wasn’t their “first encounter”, since they had met in the audience room a few days ago, but because Zenjirou had simply watched the welcome ceremony from his personal throne in silence, this was pretty much a “first encounter” for him.

Being called “your majesty” made Zenjirou flinch unintentionally, but when he saw that Aura next to him made no move to say something, he decided to leave it be.

Since he was the very first Prince Consort in the history of the Carpa Kingdom, it hadn’t been decided yet whether his title would be “majesty” or “highness”. For that reason, the nobles of the Carpa Kingdom always just added a “sama” to his name at formal or informal occasions, but you couldn’t expect the two foreigners, who had only arrived in this country a few days ago, to understand that nuance.

“Yes, enjoy it to the fullest.”

“As one of the organizers, it fills me with pride when you enjoy the party, Prince Francesco, Princess Bona.”

While repeating after Aura, Zenjirou observed the two young royalty, standing before him, with great care.

“Of course I am enjoying it. It shames me to admit it, but this is my first visit abroad in spite of my age, so everything I come across is new to me. I have never tasted any of the food or drinks here before.”

Prince Francesco, replying cheerfully, was a young man with a clear voice and finely chiselled features beaming a generous expression.

He was taller than Zenjirou, but still more or less at eye level with him, so his height was probably around 175 centimetre. But unlike

Zenjirou, he had rather long arms, legs and neck as well as well-proportioned flesh on his bones, so his figure was quite eye-catching.

The dark purple, formal attire of the Sharrow Family, a combination of a military uniform and a tuxedo, suited him accordingly well.

If Zenjirou were to wear it, he would undoubtedly only look like a courageous, but misguided cosplayer, whereas it looked like a well-suited outfit when worn by the Mr. Handsome with blonde hair and green eyes.

(Hmm, how shall I put it? He's sociable— or frivolous.)

That was the first expression he got from the prince of a foreign country. Zenjirou let his wife Aura handle the conversation and shifted his attention to the girl on the side: Princess Bona.

The impression he got from her was, in one word and somewhat rude: "plain".

"Yes, it is a major honour to be able to see the renowned prosperity of the Carpa Kingdom with my own eyes."

In the course of replying with a clear enunciation, Princess Bona kept her spine straightened well-conducted and her hands casually crossed over her abdomen, showing an forced smile strained by tension.

Her dress had a fainter purple colour than the outfit of Prince Francesco.

Their royalty might express a "rank" with the shades of purple, but in Princess Bona's case, the faint purple was quite becoming.

With her slender figure and somewhat plain features, she would be overshadowed by a dark purple dress.

Compared to Prince Francesco, her appearance left a weak impression, and if anything, her hair was the most striking feature.

It had an auburn colour and extended to half-way between her shoulders and waist. That in itself wasn't worth mentioning, but as she herself seemed to dislike its plain colour, she had apparently sprinkled silver dust over her hair, which was now sparkling brilliantly as the light of the chandeliers fell onto it.

Her hairstyle was rather peculiar, too. Originally it must have been straight, but the long hair turned quite wavy from the midway through. It wasn't as neat as a perm from Earth, but the fashion of deliberately messing about with one's hair was known to this world as well.

Princess Bona's hairstyle was a variation of that, but no other women in the hall even had a similar hairdo. Together with the shiny effect from the silver dust, she was drawing plenty of attention from the other ladies. There was a relatively large number of favourable glances, so some of them might imitate it the future.

And whilst Zenjirou was observing Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, Aura continued the conversation with affable small talk.

"Aha, then you both have come to my country at your own desire?"

"Yes. As you may know, our Sharrow Family rarely has the chance to leave the country, so I allowed myself to take advantage of this occasion. A real bonanza, so to speak. Ahaha."

"Prince Francesco, you are in the presence of Her Majesty, so please be a bit more careful about your choice of words.

My apologies, Your Majesty. Nonetheless, the prince is speaking the truth when he says that he came at his own desire and was looking forward to the visit. The same goes for me as well."

The blonde prince obviously enjoyed the light-hearted talk without showing the slightest tension, and the auburn princess was performing damage control the whole time while the actions and words of the prince kept her on tenterhooks.

Aura took care of the conversation for the most part, but since Zenjirou was attending the party, he couldn't be an onlooker

forever.

“Indeed. I actually have a good reason for why I wanted to meet His Majesty Zenjirou. It may be one-sided, but you see, I find something congenial in you.”

“You flatter me, Prince Francesco. I am also pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you.”

Zenjirou responded to the blonde prince, whose friendly interaction was definitely overfamiliar, with a forced smile.

* * *

Roughly one hour later.

“Ohhh, living is so wonderfuuul! Sing to this golden seeeea!”

The festivity was in full swing. Prince Francesco stood in the centre of the hall with a red face and was singing with a beautiful voice.

Singing, along with dancing and playing an instrument, was pretty much said to be the accomplishments of nobles, but it almost never happened that someone volunteered a sonorous song at an average evening party like this one.

That may be the case in the Carpa Kingdom, but perhaps it was nothing uncommon in the Twin Kingdom? Considering that possibility, Zenjirou looked at Princess Bona and the knights from the Twin Kingdom, who were in the same ballroom.

By doing so, he saw how the escorting knights were throwing their hands up in despair or stifling a bitter smile under their beard.

Judging by their reaction, the common knowledge in the Twin Kingdom wasn’t all that different from the one in the Carpa Kingdom.

“My apologies. He means no harm…”

As she felt guilty for not having been able to stop Prince Francesco’s eccentric behaviour, Princess Bona offered an apology for the nth

time while she wanted to curl up and die.

“No, please do not worry too much about it. He is not really inconveniencing anyone.”

Although Zenjirou replied like that with a forced smile, he couldn't help but feel guilty in his heart.

At some point, Prince Francesco had thrown off his purple jacket and was singing cheerfully. With just one look at his red face, you could tell that he was drunk right now.

That had happened, because he had lavishly emptied the fruit cocktails, which were mixed with Zenjirou's self-made "liquor".

The people of the southern continent were only used to fruit wine or ale, which had an alcohol content of less than ten percent, so when they were drinking the distilled liquor-based cocktails with the same mindset, they would obviously end up drunk.

(Well, I did warn him about the strong alcohol level. But I guess there's no way he could have imagined the strength of a liquor he sees for the first time.)

"A cheer for loooove! Sing to the silver moooooon!"

At any rate, he was truly enjoying himself at singing. Seeing him sing so refreshingly made Zenjirou somehow misapprehend that he did something good. Although he did feel bad for Princess Bona, who was trembling uncontrollably.

In fact, even the other guests had overcome their initial shock and were now showing affable smiles while they surrounded the singing prince from a foreign country at a distance.

Moreover, you could hear some musical accompaniment to his singing at some point.

(Mh?)

Zenjirou reflexively turned his head towards the origin of the music, where he saw a group of men and women, all dressed in the charming native dress of the Carpa Kingdom of old times, playing stringed instruments and cross flutes.

(Are they the palace musicians? Oh, Aura must have done that.)

Now he remembered how Aura had called for an attendant and given her some kind of order when Prince Francesco had started to sing with a loud voice.

It was nothing but a happenstance when he started to sing by himself out of the blue, but it would turn into a proper entertainment when accompanied with music from the band.

Of course that didn't change the fact that the prince had gotten carried away by his own enthusiasm to sing, but as the host of this evening party, Aura officially authorized his song by making the musicians accompany him with music.

The present nobles must have understood her intention as well. The initial awkward atmosphere had completely vanished and everyone was honestly applauding the prince of the foreign country for his song with a smile.

"Prince Francesco truly has an outgoing personality, has he not?"

"I- Indeed. Uhm… Thank you."

It was painfully obvious that Zenjirou picked the words for his evaluation very carefully, whereupon Princess Bona heaved a sigh of relief, but still showed an apologetic and troubled expression.

"Zenjirou."

Aura's eyes told him that she would go around patching up things for Prince Francesco.

"Okay."

Telling her in return with his eyes that he would manage, Zenjirou watched the back his beloved wife as she left with smooth movements, then he faced the foreign princess anew.

"Princess Bona, do you happen to be thirsty? If so, take this."

With these words, he beckoned a waiting maid over, who was available with a silver tray near by.

On his signal, the maid quickly came over, the silver tray loaded with silver goblets in hand, and held out the tray to the princess of the Twin Kingdom in a respectful manner.

“Ah, yes, thank you very much. I will have some.”

Princess Bona took one of the offered silver goblets and emptied in one gulp despite her reservation.

The goblet contained a mild fruit wine that was common in the Carpa Kingdom. Zenjirou certainly wasn’t so thoughtless as to offer the princess the distilled liquor cocktail on their first meeting.

All the more, because he had made the mistake to offer the prince some on their first meeting earlier.

“Fuh…”

Maybe she felt better after taking in some liquid, or maybe the bit of alcohol affected her already? Either way, the princess with the auburn hair relieved a bit her unfortunate tension from earlier, and glanced Prince Francesco’s way searchingly once.

“Ohhh this beautiful capitaaal! The pearl of the desert, its name iiiis!”

The drunken prince cheerfully struck up a second song, now that he had gained reassuring comrades in the form of the palace musicians.

For Princess Bona it was a painful experience, since she had been appointed as a “chaperone” by the current and next king of her country, but she could no longer interfere, now that Queen Aura had provided the “stage”.

To look for the silver lining, Queen Aura and the other nobles were clearly showing their intention to not let it escalate any further in consideration of them. Well, that in turn made her feel pathetic and useless as a “chaperone”, though.

Anyway, she realized that it would be no use to worry about Prince Francesco any further at this point as it would only tire her out

mentally, so she completely took her eyes off him for the first time this evening.

And then she noticed the “ring with magical power” on the ring finger of Zenjirou’s left hand as he held a silver goblet.

“Your Majesty Zenjirou, that ring…!”

Princess Bona had her eyes light up and she leaned forward, directing an intense gaze at Zenjirou’s left hand.

“Oh, this? Yes, you guessed right. It is the ring I had turned into a ‘magic tool’ by your family before.”

Saying so, Zenjirou switched the goblet to his right hand and brought his left hand, palm down, closer to the princess’ face, so that she could get a better look.

Anyone, who had awakened the ability to see magical power, could see it. The ring by itself emitted a magical power different than the one raising from his hand.

Zenjirou never took the “wedding ring” from Earth outside the inner palace, because its extremely detailed workmanship stood out in a bad way, but today he made an exception as it was expected.

Prince Francesco himself had applied magic to that ring, so it would be rude not to wear it today. Having said that, it might have been an unnecessary concern, considering the free spirit of the prince.

Either way, Zenjirou thought he had found a good clue to talk about with Princess Bona, because of her interest in it, so he purposefully spoke about the ring.

“If I remember correctly, Prince Francesco himself bestowed magic onto this ring?”

“Indeed. Prince Francesco is a prominent practitioner of the Bestowal Magic within the Sharrow Family. I had volunteered to help as well, but unfortunately I was disregarded. Well, it is understandable. I may have confidence in creating something from scratch, but when it comes to bestowing magic onto something pre-

existing, my magical power is just not enough."

Princess Bona kind of laughed at herself after she said that. The magical power coming from her body was certainly too low for a royalty.

She had even less than Zenjirou, who was already at the bottom level. It was the bare minimum for a royalty.

Apparently it was true that those, who inherited a "bloodline magic" atavistically, would have a minimum of its power.

(On the other hand, he's amazing. Looks like he exceeds Aura by half.)

Zenjirou gave the blonde prince, who was happily singing his third song in the middle of the ballroom, a casual glance.

The magical power hovering over the prince's body was enormous, distinguishing him as a dignified, direct descendent of the royal family.

Queen Aura also had a magical power worthy of a ruler of a major power, but Prince Francesco's was so prominent that you could tell at a glance that it was superiors to Aura's.

Compared to Zenjirou or Princess Bona, it was genuinely "more than twice as much".

(Wow. Perhaps he's even as much as Zenkichi?)

Keeping this impression to himself, Zenjirou turned his attention from the faraway prince back to the nearby princess.

"Interesting. So crafting is your specialty, Princess Bona? Reminds me, I have been told that the Twin Kingdom makes the finest jewellery on the South Continent."

"Indeed. Of course my modest abilities are still far from perfect, but I am more confident in my crafting skills than in my magical power."

Saying so, the Princess nodded briefly and her face showed more confidence than she had admitted.

The very princess, who was way too serious and seemed more or less introverted, had said she was “confident” about something. Maybe she really was already a full-fledged craftsman at her young age.

At least it was obvious that her interest and passion towards jewellery was outstanding.

“Isabelle-sama from the Jilbell Family had shown it to me once before. You brought it with you from your home country, did you not?”

It didn’t really go against the etiquette, but Princess Bona did cast a glance so passionate on his left ringer finger that Zenjirou inadvertently felt himself in danger.

Devouring something with one’s eyes meant exactly this.

Zenjirou winced innerly upon the unexpected passionate gaze, but managed to keep a smile on his face.

“Yes, you are right. In my homeland, it’s a custom that the man exchanges pair rings— meaning matching rings— with his bride when they marry.”

He simply explained the wedding rings like that. But Princess Bona didn’t seem interested in the story behind the wedding rings and paid him no mind. She was only focussing her attention on the “ring” itself.

“Oh, is that so. Then a ring like that is common in your homeland? I mean, the diamonds are cut into a brilliant polyhedron and moreover, the three of them have the same indistinguishable size and shape…”

“Y- Yes. Well, they weren’t exactly cheap, but you may do call them common.”

“Well then, do you know how the metal of the socket has been

processed? Gold certainly is easy to process, but it is beyond me how they make such detailed patterns without distortions. If you happen to know about it, I would love to hear it, if possible."

That the words poured out of her now even though she had been all restrained earlier, symbolized her enthusiasm for the "jewellery craftsmanship". Although the alcohol had a finger in the pie for a bit as well.

"No, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't have the faintest idea."

"No? Not even a little bit? Any trivial information would be fine."

"So you say, but… I'm really not an expert. Superficial knowledge would not get you anywhere."

"I do not mind. Please, something could be of use."

Zenjirou couldn't help being surprised about her zeal and appeal, which was so different from her initial demeanour.

(Uwah, she did a total 180. Did she put on an act? Nah, I didn't mistake her character. It seems more like she only becomes a different person when it comes to jewellery.)

He wasn't opposed to people, who went into a frenzy over their favourite thing or personal hobby.

"…Okay. On some future occasion then."

"Thank you very much!"

In the end, Zenjirou caved in and made an utterance that could very well be understood as a "promise".

* * *

After they had attended the evening party as hosts in sound condition, Aura and Zenjirou washed themselves clean from the sweat and perfumed oil in the bath, then spent the short while before going to bed in the air-conditioned bedroom.

“Aw, that was tiring. Man, I wish I could’ve seen Zenkichi before going to bed.”

“Fufu, do not say that. You know very well that it would trouble the wet nurse and maids when you visit Carlos this late at night, because they are obliged to wake up when we come by.”

“I know, I know.”

Even while he agreed with his wife, Zenjirou sounded regretful and heaved a deep sigh as he leaned back into the chair.

Right now, they were sitting on wooden chairs that had been placed in one corner of the bedroom.

One day after the air conditioning had been set up in the bedroom, Aura had already decreed that a small, round table (though small was relative in royal standards) and two, wooden chairs were brought into the bedroom. And one of the two LED floor lamps of the bedroom was moved from near the bed to the table in accordance with it.

From then on, they had obviously spent their evening recreation in the bedroom, but they even took almost every breakfast and dinner in there.

And these circumstances would surely continue until the hottest season was over.

The season had a lot of days, where the temperature didn’t drop below the body temperature, not even at night, so it was only natural that a person couldn’t resist the charm of the air conditioning anymore after experiencing it once.

Zenjirou washed the ice water in his glass cup down his throat in one gulp and placed the empty cup back onto the table.

“…Fuh.”

Previously he had always drunken the low-malt beer from Japan after a bath, but as one would expect, his stock had run out by now. At first, he had carefully savoured it one by one, but near the

expiration date, the flavour clearly had started to change, so he had quickly drunk the rest before it went bad.

Seeing her husband place his cup back on the table, Aura put her folded hands on the table and spoke.

“Well then, shall we begin? We have to get up early again tomorrow, so we cannot waste any time.

Zenjirou, what do you think about Prince Francesco and Princess Bona from the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow? Tell me everything, be it a simple impression or something that caught your eye.”

“Okay. Let’s see, hmm…”

He nodded shortly to her request and started to articulate carefully while he recalled what had happened at the evening party.

“I’ll start with my impression of Prince Francesco.

Well, I think it goes without saying, but he’s a ‘carefree idiot’ if his actions weren’t an act.”

“True that…”

Aura, too, wasn’t able to avoid agreeing with his honest evaluation while smiling wryly.

The behaviour Prince Francesco had shown at the evening party could only be described as “stupid”.

Although the evening party did excuse some frailties, drinking oneself to the breaking point and starting to sing with a loud voice was not something a nobleman did.

If that really had been no act, then it was explainable how Prince Francesco hadn’t gotten a claim on the throne despite being in his twenties.

However, Zenjirou inclined his head and continued.

“But if that’s the case, I think his behaviour was too uncoerced. I mean, if that was his true character, then wouldn’t he like have an unselfconscious and guileless personality that allows him to act so stupid?”

“Yes, guess so. What about it?”

“When you think about it, the Prince must have been shunned by the royal palace from a young age on, because he betrayed their expectation about his position as the legal son of the crown prince, if that carelessness and stupidity really happen to be his true character.

But would he really turn out that innocent when he was raised in such an environment?”

Zenjirou believed that the environment during childhood had an enormous influence on the development of one’s personality, and Aura didn’t object to that either, but that view was too one-sided to have her agree generally.

“I only know about it from hearsay, but Prince Francesco’s parents — namely Crown Prince Giuseppe and his wife are both respectable people. Would you not say that he could have grown up upright with plenty of love from his parents?”

Apparently her argument was worth agreeing with for him, too.

“Yeah, that’s more than possible. Besides, I heard from Princess Bona that Prince Francesco is a leading practitioner of the Bestowal Magic within the current Sharrow Family.

Having a principle like ‘I’ll keep up my chin for this at least’ plays an important role. So it wouldn’t be weird for this behaviour to be his true colours. For an act, it seemed too natural.”

He expressed his approval like this.

“But that still raises an issue.

Why would the Sharrow Family send a ‘good-natured idoit’ as the important ambassador for the first visit abroad in a hundred years?”

“Hmm, maybe they do not regard this trip as important as we do? So they just sent a prince, who is as good as disinherited, and a princess, who is royalty only in name.”

Although Aura didn’t actually think that, she urged an unconvincing argument to test her husband’s way of thinking.

His reaction was as she had expected. He shook his head immediately.

“No way. The prince’s a ‘prominent practitioner of the Bestowal Magic’, right? It’s obvious at least that he’s a skilled creator of magic tools, so there needs to be valid reason or advantage in going without his skills and sending him here, or it makes no sense.”

Yes, his conclusion wasn’t all that different from Aura’s.

“You are right.”

For now, Aura had confirmed that her husband was on the same page as her and raised a happy smile. Although the circumstances were annoying, it was pleasant to see that there were at least no problems in the communication with her husband.

“In other words, even if Prince Francesco himself has no ulterior motive, the leading royals of the Sharrow Family have an ulterior motive for sending in the unambitious prince to us. Either way, it would be dangerous to proceed on official reasons alone.”

“That’s right.”

Zenjirou affirmed Aura’s inquiring words.

In any case, tonight had been their first real encounter. Zenjirou didn’t believe that his insight was so excellent as to correctly evaluate a person he had only met once and spoken to for a little bit.

The same applied to Aura, albeit being a bit better off than him.

“Good. Then we will wait and see how things turn out with Prince Francesco for now.”

Bringing one topic to a closure like that, Aura then started to talk about the other royalty.

“Now, what is your opinion about Princess Bona?”

“Mhm, my first impression was that she’s a ‘serious person who has gone through a lot’. I’m quite confident that it’s adding up this time. She seems to be a chaperone for the prince and was so tense that I pitied her.”

He didn’t mention it, because Aura would probably not understand it, but a more accurate description would be a “timid and earnest class president”.

The image in his head was that of a girl, who had been made the class president, because she got along with the teachers due to her good grades, but wasn’t sociable and couldn’t bring the class together due to her timidity. And since she was too earnest, she couldn’t abandon the duty that had been pushed onto her, and was always doing her best with tears in her eyes.

“Yes, you are right. She was nervous and seemed to pay attention to Prince Francesco all the time. However, it looked to me like you two were talking quite livelily?”

“Yeah, at first she was a nervous wreck and kept saying ‘I am so sorry. Please forgive the inconveniences he is causing.’, though.

But as soon as the topic switched to my ring, she couldn’t hold her tongue anymore.”

A wry smile flitted across his face, as he remembered the situation.

“I was under the impression that she’s dedicating her whole life to it. She got so into it that I was a bit scared.”

“Your ring? Oh, your ‘wedding ring’. Well, that figures.”

Aura was able to relate at once, which seemed to surprise Zenjirou a bit.

“Oh really?”

He asked.

Aura nodded briefly.

“Yes, because the branch families of the Sharrow family establish themselves as magic tool makers. Men commonly set up an armament business while the women usually set up a jewellery business.

Of course Princess Bona would have her eyes light up when she sees that ring.”

She said with a short shrug of her shoulders.

An appreciator would have had its breath taken away when looking at the brilliance of his wedding ring with three small diamonds embedded in a golden socket.

Not to mention an authority on the subject like Princess Bona, who could perceive that it was impossible to recreate the uniformity of the diamonds or the detailed craftsmanship in this world no matter how hard one might try.

“Uh-huh, but it didn’t come across as ‘pure business’. She was more enthusiastic about it, practically insisting that I show her the ring and talk about it with great zeal. In the end, I gave in and kind of promised her to do so in the future.”

Zenjirou scratched his head after saying this, whereupon Aura knitted her eyebrows for the very first time this night and adopted a stern tone.

“Wait a minute, Zenjirou. That was somewhat thoughtless of you. It does not sound like you made a promise with a definite date or terms, but you ought to abstain from making careless commitments.”

Being scolded by his wife on a rare occasion, Zenjirou ducked his head with an earnest expression.

“Sorry. I know she’s a princess from a major power even if she’s at the foot of the class. It turned out like that while I was carefully

picking my words as not to be rude.

What now? I would say I can just brush it off when the time comes, because I didn't make a concrete promise."

"Hmm…"

As he asked, Aura put a hand against her chin and pondered for a moment.

(The promise in itself is not much of a problem. It was just a verbal agreement at a party and I doubt she herself believes that he will keep it. There are a lot of ways to talk our way out of it.

The problem is that it is the first time that my husband made such a careless remark.)

It would be so much better if he had made the mistake by force of habit. Judging by his current meek facial expression, Zenjirou had pulled himself together now and wouldn't made the same mistake again for a while.

The scary part was that it might be a matter of "affinity to Princess Bona".

A partner with a good compatibility. Or in other words, a partner that was easy to talk to. Or going even further, a partner, to whom he lowered his guard unconditionally.

She might be overthinking it, but to her it appeared like Zenjirou and Princess Bona were a bit too close for their first meeting.

(Normally he is rather conservative and cautious. Lady Octavia has spent a lot of time with him alone and Lady Fatima approaches him quite aggressively at every opportunity, but neither of them could get any closer to him so far.)

In comparison, Princess Bona had educed a promise to meet again at a later time from him on their first meeting, albeit in the form of just a vague verbal agreement.

(I just hope it is my imagination or jealously, but if not, it could get

a bit troublesome.)

Down the road, Aura realized that she wasn't all that pleased about another woman getting closer to her husband. She couldn't confidently say that her judgement wasn't dulled by jealousy.

For now, she decided to avoid digging any deeper into it here.

"Fine. She hardly seems to be the hard-hearted type, so just be more careful from now on.

Well then, that shall be enough for today. Let us go to bed."

Hearing her words, Zenjirou checked the time on his cell phone laying on the table, stood up from his chair and moved over to Aura sitting on the other side.

"Already this late? Got it."

Her husband naturally held out his hand to her.

"Yes."

His wife took his hand and stood up.

Hand in hand, the two of them then headed towards the bed… but Zenjirou abruptly stopped with something on his mind.

"Mh? What is the matter?"

As his wife looked puzzled at him, the husband scratched his head with his free hand

"Well, nothing of note. I was just thinking how cool it would be if I were to carry you to the bed like a princess now."

and uttered something absurd.

"Like a princess??"

"Yeah, well, how can I explain? That's how its called in my country when you lift someone up with one arm under the knees and the other around the back."

“Oho.”

The Queen mused for a while after hearing the explanation of her husband, then smirked and said.

“Mhm, you can count on me. I am feeling a bit dull lately, so it might not be possible right now, but with a bit of training, I am sure that I can carry you ’like a princess’.”

“Ehh? The roles reversed!? That’s not the least bit attractive, only hurtful. Wait, you’re saying that on purpose!!”

In the middle of his sentence, he noticed the evil smirk of his wife and artificially flew off the handle.

A woman carrying a man. Even if it was meant as a joke, a man of this patriarchic world, where strength was considered a virtue, was likely to get angry over it for real.

However, Aura had learned in the past year that her husband wasn’t the kind of narrow-minded man, who would seriously feel offended by this kind of joke, so she ended up teasing him on the spur of the moment.

It was a kind of “affection”.

“Let’s hit the sack already.”

As expected, Zenjirou merely chopped Aura’s head lightly with his free left hand while his right hand still tightly squeezed her left hand.

“Ow. Fufu, okay.”

Aura pinched his right arm between her cleavage and sweetly put her cheek against his right shoulder.

“…..”

“…..”

With their two bodies so close that they cast a single shadow, they

went towards their shared bed.

Intermission 1: The Hero and the Youngster

Around the same time.

The third son and successor of Marquis Guzzle, Xavier Guzzle stood in one room of the fortress at the southern border of the royal domain, in a meeting with General Puyol Guillén.

Inside the fortress with its thick stone walls and small dormer windows, it was gloomy even at day, but in exchange chillier than in an average house.

However, Xavier couldn't afford to enjoy the chill. A cold sweat was soaking his back as he straightened his back with all his willpower. He had his arms crossed behind him and stood at attention.

(He's the hero of the previous war, General Puyol…!)

He looked up into the face of the huge man, standing in front of him, in awe.

Based on Xavier's eye level of 160cm, the almost two metre tall General Puyol was truly a giant that he literally looked up to.

Moreover, Xavier, confident in his judgement despite his young age, could intuitionally tell that General Puyol was a seasoned warrior, whom he himself was no match for, from his posture alone.

In the presence of this man, who was overwhelming superior in social standing, combat strength and military tactics, Xavier had advanced his opinion.

Due to his nervousness, his mouth was dry and he didn't dare to swallow his saliva. Then General Puyol opened his mouth.

"I see. So you are saying that you wish to follow the 'Pack Dragon Subjugation' mission through on your own instead of letting me take over, Sir Xavier?"

The voice of the general was easy to understand even though he spoke low-keyed and far apart from loud. In response, Xavier's legs tensed up deterred and he replied.

"Not at all, General Puyol. I do know my place! From the moment on I requested help from the capital, my 'Pack Dragon Subjugation' ended up as a failure.

What I am asking of you now is that my nearly hundred soldiers and myself are allowed to participate in your operation as 'volunteers'."

"I see…"

The "I see" wording was the same as before, but the nuance was different. This time it was filled with appreciation, as he saw the shrunk youngster before him in a new light.

"Hmm."

General Puyol stood there relaxed and mused for a moment, then he nodded short and spoke.

"Sir Xavier, I believe that this expedition will likely take up a lot of time.

You have located a large pack. If we can trust the theory of the hunters that the Pack Dragons get smarter and stronger with advancing age, they will turn out to be a tough opponent."

"Ah, yes. I believe so as well."

Although Xavier was perplexed about that fact that the general didn't answer his question and suddenly voiced his own opinion eloquently instead, he still agreed with him.

And he was saying it in earnest.

If the leader of the Pack Dragons was really smart enough to understand the difference in strength between both parties, then it was more than likely that they wouldn't appear in front of General Puyol's "Dragonback Archery Knights" to begin with.

In that case, they would have to scour that large and dense forest for them.

And that in turn meant that it would inevitably turn into a drawn-out mission, unless they were extremely lucky or managed to set up a good trap.

“But then the emergency stock of salt in the March becomes a problem. If I recall correctly, your stocks last for around three months at best?”

Xavier realized what the General was getting at and nodded with a stern expression.

“Yes. It would be enough for half a year if we were to ration it, but it would worry the citizen and have a bad effect on the price. If possible, I would like to refrain from doing so.”

General Puyol was apparently satisfied with his response. He nodded briefly without changing his facial expression at all.

“To prevent that, I have brought large quantities of salt with me from the capital.

Of course it will be impossible to guard all this salt while hunting the ’Pack Dragons’. My initial plan intended to return to this fortress as soon as the subjugation is completed and transport the salt to your March.

But the addition of your men will change my plans a bit.

Sir Xavier, if you were to devote your men to transporting and guarding that salt, I would like to give priority to delivering the salt to the March first by forcing our way through the road.

Naturally, I will count on your troops to be on the front line during the military offensive afterwards, if we are not fortunate enough to encounter and wipe out the Pack Dragons on the way there. What do you say?”

Xavier innerly assented with his reasoning.

In other words, General Puyol was willing to bring them along as long as they occupied themselves with the transport and guard of the salt.

(Basically he's saying that we won't get a chance to join the battle when we encounter the pack on the way, but if they don't finish them off then, we'll be allowed to redeem ourselves on the frontlines afterwards.)

Furthermore, as the successor to the March, he ought to welcome the proposal of quickly delivering the salt to the domain with open arms.

Overall, Xavier had no reason to turn him down.

"Understood. Please let us do it, General Puyol.

I offer you my deepest gratitude for prioritizing the delivery of the salt to the March in place of all its citizens."

"Do not mention it. I am just doing my part."

General Puyol's face showed a smile for the first time today when he replied like that.

Chapter 02: The Puppet and the Puppet Master

Ten or so days had passed since Prince Francesco and Princess Bona had come to the Carpa Royal Palace.

That time span was long enough to make the presence of the foreign prince and princess somewhat natural in the royal palace.

This applied to both sides: The accommodated delegation as well as the accommodating Carpa Royal Palace.

Needless to say, it wasn't all-encompassing. The building was fundamentally different from their home country. Although there were plenty of them, the foreign waiting maids had slightly differing views. And while they did bring some cooks from their home country along, they just couldn't get the daily meals to taste the same, because of the involved ingredients.

Ten days were definitely too short to accept these essential differences in their cultures. On the contrary, these kind of differences could cause homesickness as they accumulated over time, so the real ordeal may yet to come.

Nevertheless, it also happened that some people never suffered from a life in a foreign country at all, albeit being a minority.

Fortunately, or rather, as expected, Prince Francesco belonged to that minority.

"Prince Francesco, please take a look at this. This is the garment with the new buttons that I have mentioned to you before. Unfortunately this is just a sample and a little bit too small for you to wear, but I will have one in your size with the same cloth tailored for you, if you wish so."

At the southern side of the Carpa Royal Palace, in one room of the building that was assigned to the delegation from the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow, Prince Francesco had called for the

merchant and was enjoying some innocent shopping today again.

The sunlight fell through the numerous opened windows and illuminated the room, where the garments and textiles from the merchant crowded the floor.

Just like the merchant had said earlier, the tailored clothes were nothing but samples and there was no stock of the same item in different sizes like it was common in boutiques in Japan.

In other words, all the assembled clothes here only varied in pattern or shape.

“Hmm, fascinating. Their design obviously originates from the North Continent, too, but they are completely different from the ones in my country. Truly fascinating, indeed.”

Prince Francesco weaved his way through the spaces between the widely spread clothes while he noted with bright eyes.

The western-styled clothes had originally come to the South Continent from the North Continent. Due to that, the basic design was the same in the Carpa Kingdom in the western part and the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow in the central part of the South Continent, but each developed its own characteristics as the local cultural customs influenced it after all.

“Okay, for now I will take three sets of clothes. The first one will be that garment with the new ’round buttons with four holes’. Then the one you described as the ‘most common in the Carpa Kingdom’ earlier. And I leave the last one up to your decision. Get me a piece of clothes that will suit me.”

“Yes, very well! I will do my utmost best to deliver you three set of clothes that will definitely win your favour.”

Having secured a generous customer in form of a direct royalty of a major power, the merchant prostrated on the spot without hiding his joy.

“…..”

In contrast, the escorting knights, standing near the wall, kept an indifferent face.

The target they had to guard was ordering new clothes in a foreign land, which caused the knights unnecessary troubles, since Prince Francesco's well-being was their highest priority.

As a rule, the occupation of the tailor was said to place fourth in the ranking of 'types of occupations that were promising for assassination when being in favour' (incidentally, far at the top stood the 'doctor' as the #1, followed by the 'cook' on #2 and the 'hairdresser' on #3 by far).

In order to tailor clothes, it was necessary to measure the body of the purchaser and approach him with needles to pin the cloth in place.

A tailor wasn't as suspicious as a "hairdresser", who stood behind

the target with scissors or a razor for a long time, but the occupation still presented enough opportunities, if he meant harm.

For that reason, a tailor working for the royal family usually required a clean background and personality on top of the tailoring skills.

When a direct royalty then let the tailor affiliated with a merchant from a distant, foreign country make him some clothes, his guards would only shake their heads in disbelief.

However, the knights, standing in the back, showed no sign of stopping Prince Francesco, even though they were stifling a sour face.

Judging by their expression, they probably had already given up on interfering with his antics.

Still, they might have given up on stopping the purchase itself, but they could never abandon their duty to protect him.

They would take as much precautions as possible, such as: Preparing the needles to pin the cloth from their end, examining all the cloths before they were held up against the Prince's body and seeking an assurance about the background of the merchant and tailor from the Carpa Kingdom.

Even so, the danger couldn't be averted altogether and the knights would held be responsible if anything were to happen.

"Good, I am looking forward to it. I will be available for a fitting at all times, so feel free to come by whenever you need to."

"Yes, thank you very much. I will do my utmost."

"….."

The prince pledged himself to something troublesome with an innocent smile, whereas the knights near the wall just watched over him while stifling all kind of reactions, such as making a sour face or sighing.

* * *

Who turned out to be the busiest person because of the visit from Prince Francesco and Princess Bona? It goes without saying that it was Zenjirou.

Naturally, the evaluation of the “busiest” was relative, measured by the difference between before and after the visit, so he wasn’t actually the busiest person in the palace.

Previously, Zenjirou had been attending some official events in place of Aura, but it hadn’t been rare either that he got a whole day off.

However, that kind of lifestyle came to end with the visit of the Prince Francesco and Princess Bona.

After all, they were the prince and princess of the major power: Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow. It required a rather high “status” to keep them company and as the Prince Consort, Zenjirou was the only other adult royalty of the Carpa Kingdom besides Aura.

Since Aura couldn’t abandon her duties as the Queen, it was extremely self-evident that Zenjirou was sent out to deal with the prince and princess.

“Zenjirou-sama, like I have told this morning, you now have a meeting with Prince Francesco. He is already waiting in the anteroom. Shall I bring him inside?”

Secretary Fabio’s flat voice resounded in the room of the palace, which recently had turned into Zenjirou’s “office and audience room”.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

Zenjirou met the gaze of the expressionless middle-age man, who was looking down on him from above, and corrected his sitting position on the couch, then nodded.

Actually, he felt like stretching himself out and heaving a deep sigh,

but he couldn't act so sloppy in front of the trusted retainer of his wife, who always had one word too many to say.

This middle-aged secretary was, like Aura had ensured, definitely a capable person, versed in the inner workings of the palace, but every time Zenjirou did something careless, this man was cautioning him with a mixture of spite and sarcasm, so he just couldn't bring himself to like him.

But at the same time, he felt relieved over the fact that he would avoid making fatal mistakes when he followed his advice, which irritated him even more. Secretary Fabio often spoke ambiguously and tried to test him with his behaviour, but he properly held his tongue during times like this, where they couldn't risk an embarrassment to the outside world.

"Okay, I will bring him in. Please wait a moment."

Saying only that, Secretary Fabio left the room for now.

Roughly ten minutes later. Zenjirou was chatting with Prince Francesco, who sat on the couch across.

"Is that so? I'm glad to see that you have acclimated already, Prince Francesco."

"Indeed. Your country and mine are not all that different in temperatures or food after all. Ahaha."

Zenjirou forced a smile, whereas the blonde prince cheerfully replied with an absolutely innocent smile.

However, the prince's earlier words and reality were contradicting each other.

The Carpa Kingdom was mainly covered by thick forests and had high temperatures while the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow was a desert for the most part with always dry air even though it had the same temperature. It was rather far-fetched to claim that these climates were "not all that different".

Needless to say, the differences in the climate also manifested itself

in the flora and fauna, which in turn influenced the eating habits of the people living there.

In broad outline they were definitely resembling each other, for example that a lightly-baked bread was a staple food or that spicy soup and roasted meat were favoured. But on a closer look, the flour used for the bread turned out to be different, not to mention the kind of spices.

To draw a parallel, it was as extreme as grouping the French and English cuisine together as the “same western cuisine”.

(Though in his case, he might actually be serious about it.)

In their meetings over the past few days, Zenjirou had more or less started to comprehend the Prince’s personality and was cracking a bitter smile at heart.

Anyway, the prince’s behaviour was unpredictable. As all his words were directly conducted by his emotions and impulses, he was often contradicting himself.

Leaving aside the question whether his words were the truth or some elaborated act, Zenjirou would certainly go crazy if he were to take every single word from him at face value.

In any case, he was lucky that the topic resolved around food, since he had prepared some clues in advance.

“Reminds me, Prince Francesco, you seemed rather fond of the ‘distilled liquor’ at the evening party. If you want, I can cede you a bottle.”

“Really! Thank you, Your Majesty Zenjirou!”

Zenjirou turned a bit away as the Prince was more interested than expected, and called out to Secretary Fabio, who stood at attention behind him.

“Y- Yes, really. Fabio, bring it over.”

“As you wish.”

With one bow, the middle-aged secretary left for the room next door. Zenjirou observed him out of the corner of his eyes while he waited silently for his return with the “distilled liquor”… Or so he had intended to, but his plan crumbled like a house of cards.

“Woah, I can hardly wait! Thank you so much. I had never tasted such a strong alcohol before and now I am really hooked on it! Alcohol has always been a weakness of mine, but that was something entirely different. You drink it mixed with all kind of other things, right? I would love to try out a certain blend.”

The blonde prince, sitting across from him, seemingly couldn’t stand a moment of silence and continued to chatter happily.

It was somewhat considered to be bad manners to continue the chatter one-sidedly when facing a conversational partner of equal standing, but there would be no end if you started to point out every little offence to the prince.

“I see. Then I am glad to offer you some, if you like it so much.”

While Zenjirou was conversing with a forced smile, Secretary Fabio returned.

“I have brought it, Zenjirou-sama.”

“Good.”

Remaining seated on the couch, Zenjirou replied with a short nod, whereupon Secretary Fabio put down a bottle wrapped in red cloth before him without a sound.

Zenjirou reached out for the table and undid the knot of the wrapped cloth, revealing what was inside.

“Ohh!”

Prince Francesco exclaimed in awe, but this time his reaction was not exaggerated. As a matter of fact, even the knights, standing at attention behind the prince, had replaced their previous inexpressive with surprise.

The red cloth let out a “transparent, rectangular container”.

It was the “whiskey bottle” that Zenjirou had brought with him from his world.

The tall bottle with a square base was made out of thick, transparent glass. Moreover, the whole surface was rugged like the shell of a tortoise, so the sunlight coming from the windows made it shine brilliantly like a gem.

The bottle had originally been filled with the amber-coloured whiskey, but right now it contained Zenjirou’s self-made “distilled liquor”, which had a colour close to transparent. Due to that, the whiskey bottle was practically entirely transparent, making it a real eye-catch.

In the eyes of the people from the South Continent, where no class manufacture existed, this wasn’t just a container, but rather a piece of art.

“Wonderful! You are giving it me like this!? You will not ask me to give back the container once I emptied it, right!?”

“I will not. Please take it with you.”

As Prince Francesco was plagued by worries of poverty inappropriate for his standing, Zenjirou eased his sorrow with a shake of his head.

He wrapped the whiskey bottle in the red cloth again, then raised a bit from the couch and slid the bottle towards Prince Francesco.

“But I ask you to be careful. This bottle is way more fragile than one out of wood or silver. If you drop it from high up, it will break easily and if the surface is hard enough, it might even get damaged by just falling over.”

Warning him like that, Zenjirou watched Prince Francesco’s behaviour with utmost attention.

It hadn’t been his own judgement to present the prince the glass whisky bottle. Last night, he had made that decision in consultation

with Aura.

Although the Twin Kingdom had shown a profound interest in the marbles, they weren't all that impressed by the beads.

Then what about a transparent glass bottle? They had decided on this present because they wanted to observe his reaction and the result exceeded their expectation, but at the same time, betrayed their anticipation.

"Wow, this really is amazing. What is it made of? I have never seen such a clear craft, not even with crystals. Not to mention its perfect shape without distortions!"

The exaggerated joy in the facial expression of the prince was all too pure, making it impossible to distinguish whether it was directed at a mere "beautiful piece of art" or at "something valuable for making a magical tool".

(Man, I can't tell at all. Guess I should've made Aura come along or at least taken a secret shot of his attitude with my digital camera.)

Although he did regret that at heart, he also did understand that it had been practically impossible.

It was uncertain how long the Prince would have to wait until Aura found the time to attend the meeting as well, since she was busy with her duties as a Queen, and he hadn't been able to think of a way to take a shot with the digital camera without raising suspicion.

The whiskey bottle would be just waste glass in Japan, but in this world it was one of his limited, irreplaceable goods, so it would definitely be a shame to give it away for nothing.

And Prince Francesco seemed to have discerned that worry of him.

"But I would feel bad if I were to accept something so wonderful without repaying you. What do you say when I offer to make a 'magic tool' for you in exchange, Your Majesty Zenjirou?"

He proposed the best Zenjirou could ask for.

It was a windfall that the Prince brought up the topic of making a magic tool of his own accord.

Once again, Zenjirou paid attention to Prince Francesco's facial expression and speech while he replied.

"Now that sounds great. But I've heard that it takes quite a long time to make a magic tool. Will you manage? I believe that you have already promised to make us one magic tool while you stay here."

As a compensation for the expenses of the delegation during their stay and the permission for the escorting knights to bring certain weapons into the palace, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona had promised to endow the Carpa Kingdom with one magic tool each.

The time required to make a magic tool accounted to months for something simple and years for something with a "bloodline magic" embedded into it. Consequently, the "personal gratitude" for the whiskey bottle would take place many years in the future.

"Yes, you are right. Hmm, what to do? It would be no problem if I just had one of these transparent, colourless jewels…"

"!?"

Zenjirou wanted to praise his own self-restraint for not snorting when he heard the quiet words of the prince that he muttered more or less to himself at the end of his sentence.

(Has he lost his mind!? Wasn't that supposed to be top secret!?)

The production period for a magic tool could drastically be shortened with the use of "transparent, colourless orbs" like the marbles. Or at least that had been an unreliable rumour only few knew of.

Apparently, Aura was more or less convinced that this rumour was true through gossip and correspondence with the Twin Kingdom, but there still was no specifying proof, of course.

Not in their wildest dreams they would have thought to get that

proof so quickly and moreover, exposed by one of the proprietors himself.

Maybe this prince really was just a simple idiot? Such a convenient though crossed Zenjirou's mind, when suddenly

"Excuse me, Zenjirou-sama."

the voice of a sentinel resounded from beyond the door.

Zenjirou excused himself from Prince Francesco, who was sitting across from him.

"What's the matter?"

With a loud voice, he called out to beyond the door.

"Yes, Princess Bona has come for a visit. May she come in?"

Then he realized it all too late.

Why hadn't Princess Bona been present here?

It hadn't bothered him that Prince Francesco had come by himself, because only the name of the prince had been announced for the meeting, but now that he gave it another thought, something was odd.

At the evening party it had become more than obvious that Princess Bona was supposed to be a "chaperone" for Prince Francesco.

Would that faithful Princess Bona really allow an extremely dangerous situation such as the troublemaking prince meeting the royalty of another country all by himself, to happen?

"Prince Francesco?"

Zenjirou already kind of knew the answer and darted a prompting glance at the blonde prince as he called his name.

Prince Francesco showed a bright smile without the slightest shred of ill will, then

“Well, she always has to accompany me, you see. So I thought she could need some time for herself, too, and came here without telling her, but what can I say, she really takes her duties seriously.”

told him while he scratched his blonde-haired head.

“Is that so. But now that she’s here, you do not mind that she comes in, right?

You heard me? Let her in.”

(…I wouldn’t want to be in Princess Bona’s shoes.)

Pitying the princess with the auburn hair quite a bit in thought, Zenjirou gave the soldier beyond the door an order with a loud voice.

* * *

“I apologize that I have come by without prior notice. And I offer you my deepest gratitude for accepting my whim so readily, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

Princess Bona’s first words were exactly what Zenjirou had expected: An apology.

A visit without prior notice certainly was not a nice way. Even more so when you considered that Zenjirou counted as a “public character” in the royal palace and the two of them weren’t exactly close enough to ignore these unwritten rules.

But Zenjirou could relate to the princess’ role as a “chaperone”, so he didn’t intend to make a fuss about something like this.

“No, it’s alright. That said, it won’t happen every time as I’ve things going on at my end to consider, too, but on occasions like today, I’ve no reason to refuse you.”

Even while he gave her a light warning, he also voiced his approval of her action.

The “occasions like today” part was obviously referring to the

present situation, where Prince Francesco had dared to meet Zenjirou all by himself, giving his chaperone Princess Bona the slip.

In other words, he was implying the meaning: “Please join us the next time this happens without worrying about making an appointment or giving prior notice.”

And she must have properly comprehended his hint.

“Th- Thank you very much.”

Princess Bona made an expression like she had a narrow escape from death and lowered her head once more.

“Hmm, not sure what is going on, but good for you, Bona.”

“!…Yes, Prince Francesco.”

As the main culprit for her worries uttered something easy-going, Princess Bona was about to say something on reflex, but then realized that it was inappropriate for this place and swallowed these words at the last moment.

The mood could need some refreshing. Sensible to that, Zenjirou spoke with a tone like he thought of it just now.

“Come to think of, I usually have tea around this time. What do you say? How about we go out into the garden and continue our conversation in the pavilion?”

He casually suggested.

The prince and princess had no real reason to decline, so

“Yes, sounds good. I was just feeling a little thirsty, too.”

“Yes, thank you very much. I will take you up on your offer.”

the two of them replied affirmative.

The pavilion in the garden was a building without walls and only four pillars that supported a shingled roof. The trees had been

planted in such a way that the wind blew over the nearby fountain into the pavilion, so it was a lot chillier there than in the royal palace.

For that reason it had been an extremely reasonable suggestion to spend the hot noon hours in the pavilion. However, Zenjirou didn't choose this place for its chill.

As the pavilion stood near the fountain, there was obviously a constant splashing of water to be heard. As a result, the conversation within the pavilion couldn't be overheard by the escorting knights or the secretary, who were all standing by outside, unless they deliberately raised their voices.

His thoughtfulness had made Zenjirou relocate the conversation to this place, because he wanted to clue Princess Bona in on the "slip of tongue" from Prince Francesco and get her confirmation about it.

"Well then, I will take some cold tea."

After he had said down in the typical local chair made out of wood and vine, Zenjirou kept his gaze directed forward while he called out to the person behind him with a normal vocal volume on purpose.

In reaction,

"Zenjirou-sama? Did you say something?"

Secretary Fabio asked back affected.

"Yeah, did you not hear me? I said to bring me some tea."

Now Zenjirou repeated himself with a louder voice. All of that had been pre-arranged by them.

He had wanted to show the prince and princess that they wouldn't be heard by the others if they spoke normally, but the only indication to whether they had understood him or not, were there facial expressions.

"I will take cold tea, too. They say you ought to drink something

hot and sweat during the heat, but I really prefer something ice-cold when it is hot outside."

Saying so, Prince Francesco showed a grin, but otherwise his expression was unreadable, which wasn't all that surprising for Zenjirou.

The problem was Princess Bona. She was truly easy to read.

"Eh? Ah! Ehh!? Ahh! …I, I will take cold tea as well…"

Put into words, her expression first changed into "doubt", then into "comprehension". In the next moment it already changed into "doubt" yet again and lastly, "shock" was written all over her face.

She had been perplexed right after hearing him out, because she didn't understand the hidden meaning, but after a few seconds, she made an "Oh, I see" face, now that she had read between the lines. But directly afterwards, she had wondered why there had been a necessity for such a confidential talk, and finally, she had despaired, because she concluded that Prince Francesco must have had exposed some secret information to Zenjirou before her arrival.

At heart, Zenjirou pitied her, but he couldn't let that emotion influence him in his position. On the contrary, his position obliged him to broach the subject again and profit from that slip of tongue.

(Though I can't overdo it and incur their displeasure. And I'm not supposed to do anything spectacular in my position either… Now this is a pain.)

While these thoughts crossed his mind, the waiting maids with orders from Secretary Fabio finished placing the silver goblets with drinks and wooden plates with snacks onto the table.

The wooden plates with elaborated designs carved into the fine wood were masterpieces, to say nothing of the silver goblets.

Zenjirou brought his silver goblet to his mouth and wetted his throat a bit. He fixated his gaze equally on the blonde-haired prince and auburn-haired princess sitting across from him as he spoke.

“Prince Francesco, earlier you mentioned that the time for making a magic tool would be no problem if you had a ‘transparent, colourless jewel’. What did you mean by that? Maybe you could explain the process in detail?”

Zenjirou had imagined that a point-blank approach would be best, but his words evoked a drastic change in Princess Bona.

“Pfft!?”

She snorted with all her might without any chance to keep up appearance. Her whole body was caked with “horror”, not just her face. Lucky under the circumstances, she didn’t had anything in her mouth.

Of course Zenjirou had waited to bring it up until he had confirmed that Princess Bona had swallowed her tea, just in case, and his consideration had certainly paid off. Though it was hardly any consolation for the Snort Princess herself.

However, there was something far more pressing than pursuing the unladylike reaction of Princess Bona in front of a foreign royalty, namely: the bombshell announcement that had caused that very reaction.

“G- Good gracious, Prince Francesco, you have told him about it!?”

That Princess Bona hadn’t lost her senses yet reveal itself in the fact that she still kept her voice at a normal level. But her face was “pale” in the true sense of the word and the voice that left her lips, which had turned bluish violet, had transcended a mere scream and was closer to a “death cry”.

But the anxious state of mind of the princess was completely ignored.

“Hmm, now that you mention it, I might have let something like that slip out. I said it in a very low voice, but I guess His Majesty Zenjirou heard me anyway. Ahaha.”

“…This is no laughing matter, Prince Francesco. It was supposed to be a secret amongst the Sharrow Family!”

“Oh, right. That is the way it is, Your Majesty Zenjirou, so please keep it to yourself.”

Prince Francesco made an expression like he only realized that fact now, put his index finger against his mouth and lowered his voice, which in turn enraged Princess Bona.

“What is the point of asking him to keep it a secret now!? It spelled doom for us the moment he heard about it!”

“Please calm down, Princess Bona. It may be weird for me to say this, but Prince Francesco was really speaking in very low tone, so I’m sure I was the only one to hear him as I sat directly across from him.

Let us have a more constructive-minded conversation.”

Zenjirou thought to himself how callow she still was, with a wry smile while he appeased her like that. If his earlier words had only been a bluff, then her reaction would have given away crucial information for sure, but she herself didn’t realize that.

Having said that, Princess Bona was only sixteen years old yet. In Japan she would still be a high school girl. Only a handful of people ever managed to get negotiations skills like a poker face or improvisation at a practical level at this young age, even if they were of royal birth. It would definitely go too far to expect that much from the diligent princess.

“Ah, yes. Please forgive me for stepping out of line…”

Reflecting on her actions, Princess Bona now turned bright red and bowed repeatedly. On the other hand,

“Indeed. No use crying over spilt milk. Let us work towards a more productive end.

Your Majesty Zenjirou, I can certainly cut down the time for creating a magic tool if you were to hand over one of these jewels in your possession. What do you say?”

Prince Francesco requested that with a bright smile as if he had

decided on that course of action from the very beginning.

(Ohh… Maybe he isn't just an idiot after all?)

"Okay, I understand the gist of it. But what I don't understand is why it has to be a marble— that jewel. I've heard that the Twin Kingdom has the best skills for gemcutting on the South Continent. Would it not suffice to polish a crystal into a spherical shape?"

Glossing over his naturally raising wariness with a smile to the best of his abilities, Zenjirou inquired as casually as possible.

Prince Francesco shock his head in an exaggerated manner, still smiling cheerfully.

"Not at all. You are giving our gemcutters a bit too be much credit.

Of course our country has gemcutting skills that are prominent on the whole continent, but it is impossible to polish some transparent material into such a perfect spherical shape. Right, Bona?"

The addressed Princess Bona heaved an heavy sigh as she finally resigned after she had quarrelled with him for some time, and started to speak.

"Indeed. We certainly do not have anyone capable of that at present. Polishing a gem purely depends on the skills of the lapidary, and in the past, some craftsmen had been able to polish a crystal into a useful spherical shape.

But then, I heard that even these exceptional craftsmen rarely succeeded and took a lot of time, so they fabricated three or four at best in their lifetime. Besides, a craftsman of such a calibre would not dedicate his whole work life to the creation of these spheres alone."

"Oh, I see."

Zenjirou assented impressed.

In fact, the polishing of hard minerals into spheres had only become possible in the latter centuries on Earth as well.

It actually required really advanced skills to cut a perfect sphere from minerals. Not that Zenjirou would know about it.

In comparison, it was extremely easy to make marbles. Because, unlike a crystal, where you had to “cut it into a perfect sphere”, marbles were shaped like that from the ground up.

Simply put, you let an adequate amount of fluid glass of high viscosity roll down a spiral slope like a waterslide, and by the time it arrives at the bottom, it will have cooled down and taken a spherical shape.

Needless to say, you ended up with mostly deformed spheres that were hardly perfectly round by using this simple method, but you just had to repeat it long enough to pick out the satisfying products.

While Zenjirou recalled the “marble manufacture procedure” that he had seen at a glass museum during a field trip in high school at the back of his mind, he nodded his assent and carried on the dialogue.

“That certainly makes them valuable. Still, to what extent does the jewel affect the procedure when you actually use it?”

“Well…”

Princess Bona hesitated to speak up, as she still seemed to be opposed to disclosing everything at the last moment, but the blonde prince, sitting next to her, had no such reservations.

“Believe it or not, but it has an enormous influence. You can finish the bestowal of a typical element magic in one day with the jewel you have presented Princess Isabelle with before. The important factors for an item to be bestowed with magic are ‘colour’ and ‘shape’.

Am I right, Bona?”

How much more did he intend to disclose? Prince Francesco didn’t show the slightest inclination to stop his chattiness, which prompted Princess Bona, who was bad at making a poker face to begin with, to screw up her face all too obviously.

At this rate, it seemed like the only way to put the prince to silence would be by sheer force from the guarding knights with an order.

Princess Bona strengthened her resolve as she concluded such. Now that it had come to this, she ought to take up the reins of the conversation by explaining things herself and somehow turn the one-sided exchange of information into a give-and-take.

With a vexing resolve like that, Princess Bona looked Zenjirou straight in the eye, then nodded with an obviously sugarcoated expression.

"…Yes. The more transparent and colourless it is, the quicker the magic gets bestowed upon it. But even if it is not colourless, something with a high transparency is better than one without. That is actually the reason why gems are so highly valued as a target for bestowal.

Then there is the shape… Oh my, please forgive me. I let myself get carried away.

Do you happen to be interested in this, Your Majesty Zenjirou?"

After revealing a bit of information, the girl with the auburn hair asked him that a bit affected.

Thus, Zenjirou realized what Princess Bona was implying.

(Oh yeah, she's trying to make me say that I'm interested. If I commit myself to it, the fact that Prince Francesco spoke of his own accord will at least give the impression that he talked because I expressed interest.)

Now that he had noticed her aim, there was no need to play along.

But if he were to drive them into a tight corner, it was possible that the relationship to the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow would be damaged.

Making a quick judgement, Zenjirou smiled exaggerated and replied.

“Well, it is a truly fascinating topic. But I’m afraid that I’m not the right conversational partner for it. As embarrassing it is to admit it, I only just awakened my ability to discern magical power by sight at my age and barely know anything about magic yet, so I fear that I will only disappoint you two by saying something absurd.

That will not happen with Queen Aura, though.”

Loosely translated, he was saying: “In my position, I’ll not be able to make any promises for a compensation, even if you give me more information now. Please direct such requests at Queen Aura herself.”

Zenjirou hadn’t used any particular abstruse metaphors for lack of time, which fortunately brought about the result that the princess with the auburn hair correctly caught his implied meaning and brightened her smile in relief.

“Is that so. Then would it be alright to continue our conversation at a later date in the company of Her Majesty Aura?”

“Yes. I will advise her accordingly.”

The matter had been settled somehow or other. Princess Bona couldn’t stop the relief from showing up on her face, whereas Zenjirou with his poker face was inwardly liberated from just as much pressure and nervousness as the girl sitting in front of him.

The only reason he barely managed to conceal it was his slightly superior experience.

“…..”

On the other hand, Prince Francesco acted completely different from his earlier chatty self. He politely refrained from interrupting their conversation and simply watched over it with an innocent grin.

* * *

After Zenjirou parted with Prince Francesco and Princess Bona at the pavilion in the garden, he once more returned to his office in

the royal palace.

“….”

Only Secretary Fabio was with him in the room. The office was steaming hot in comparison with the pavilion, but even that steaming hot air felt comfortable, now that the heavy responsibility in form of the meeting with two royalty from a foreign major power had been taken off his shoulders.

Sitting on the edge of the leather couch with his legs apart, he relaxed his shoulders and took a deep breath.

Secretary Fabio darted a cursory glance at him, but he refrained from saying anything now, though.

He surely realized that Zenjirou’s mind and body wouldn’t last if he didn’t get to relax a bit when his schedule had time to spare and no one else was around.

Another detestable point about the middle-aged secretary was that he meticulous waited for the very moment he caught his breath and regained some of his stamina and willpower, to call out to him.

“Well then, Zenjirou-sama, may I ask you something? Earlier you relocated to the pavilion in the middle of the conversation, but can I assume that you did that, because you had something to discuss that was not meant for our ears?”

Maybe this man could see the recovery rate of his stamina and willpower in numbers? For a moment, Zenjirou harboured such an unrealistic doubt, but then he had to answer his question.

He nodded short and sat up well-mannered on the couch. Then he leaned into on the backrest and looked up to the middle-aged secretary standing before him as he opened his mouth.

“Yes, you can. It actually concerned classified information from the Twin Kingdom. To be honest, I never expected Prince Francesco to carelessly reveal so much.

I cannot possible tell you about it.

Of course I'll report the details to Aura. If you should feel the need to know about it, ask her later."

"Mhm… I see."

In reaction to Zenjirou's reply, Secretary Fabio put his right hand under his thin chin and pondered for a while.

It was not often that the middle-aged secretary, detached by Aura, got absorbed in thought for a long time.

Had Zenjirou said something bad in his response? Although he did not show it on the surface, Zenjirou was a bit nervous at heart as he waited for the answer of the secretary.

Then Secretary finally seemed to have collected his thoughts. He nodded once and grumbled more or less to himself.

"We might have been 'deceived' instead."

Zenjirou frowned in regards to the ominous remark.

"Deceived? What do you mean? Explain it."

As far as he could remember, he hadn't been so negligent to let them deceive him. If anything, he viewed it as a one-sided diplomatic victory for himself, whereby the other party had slipped up of their own accord.

The middle-aged secretary received Zenjirou's obvious stern look from below, and answered without so much as moving a muscle as always.

"Okay. The fact that you alone heard classified information from the Twin Kingdom at first hand poses a great problem.

I would like to confirm one thing with you. After Prince Francesco disclosed that classified information, did he forbid you to say anything about it?"

"Yeah, he did. He said I should keep it to myself."

Zenjirou answered perplexed, but honestly, whereat Secretary Fabio nodded as if to say “I knew it”.

“In that case, in my humble opinion, we have no choice but to abide by that, whether that is true to their intention or not.

After all, it is classified information from the Twin Kingdom of Jilbell and Sharrow. I cannot say how advantageous it would be if we were to utilize it effectively, but it would definitely bear some kind of fruit.

In addition, there will be official records of your meeting with Prince Francesco today.

Truly a magnificent diplomatic achievement. It will raise the ‘fame of His Majesty Zenjirou’ for sure, yes.”

“…Aw.”

Zenjirou even forgot to caution him about calling him sarcastically by the title “His Majesty” as he breathed a sound of dismay.

It was quite clear what Secretary Fabio was trying to say.

The more advantage the Carpa Kingdom took of the information Zenjirou had attained today, by bringing it to light, the more it would highlight his achievement and raise his fame whether they liked it or not.

Needless to say, that was the worst case scenario for Zenjirou and company.

The patriarchal values were ingrained in the Carpa Kingdom. For example, an “achievement” of this level alleged it as a plausible pretext to expand Zenjirou’s sphere of influence.

Although the nobles acknowledged Queen Aura’s ability as a politician, the majority of them harboured an emotional aversion towards the fact that they played second fiddle to a woman.

Due to the issue with a lawful lineage, no one was so stupid to claim that the throne and crown should be abdicated to Zenjirou,

but many put forth a “sound argument” that he ought to have an authority appropriate to his standing as the only adult male of the royal family.

Of course some people were suggesting that out of pure good will or their sense of justice, but above all, most of them were saying it in self-interest, thinking that they were “easier to deal with” if Zenjirou had more authority than Queen Aura.

“So… what’s it to be? Are you saying they still have the upper hand right now?”

As he was still confused, Zenjirou spoke with an unconfident and inquiring tone, whereupon Secretary Fabio shortly nodded once in affirmation.

“Yes. We admittedly might benefit from bringing the matter to light, but at the same time, it will cause mayhem. Hence, it is necessary to keep it in confidence. I deem it proper to remain passive.”

“Why should we have to be careful to keep it a secret when they were the ones, who leaked it to us… Sounds a bit unreasonable to me.”

Zenjirou ended up complaining on the spur of the moment even though he saw the truth in Secretary Fabio’s advice.

But while he was talking with him, the initial shock faded and his train of thought got back on track as well.

“I wonder if Prince Francesco really considered it in all its bearings when he acted? I do admit that the situation’s too convenient for the whimsical actions of a free-spirited man to be responsible for it alone, though.”

The middle-aged secretary shrugged his slender shoulders a bit in reaction to his question

“Everything certainly plays out too well to call it a coincidence. But even if we were to assume that Prince Francesco’s attitude had been a farce and that he is actually far more intelligent than he lets on, I

still believe that it would be an overstatement to say that he caused this situation wittingly.

I mean, it would have played out entirely different if you had happened to be ambitious. For now, I say that it is impossible that he caused this in purpose."

and replied with that.

Secretary Fabio certainly had a point. Or rather, Zenjirou was an exception amongst exceptions. In general, there was no such thing as a male royalty, who would keep confidential information of this level to himself out of consideration for his wife.

Normally, the Prince Consort would make good use of the information as soon as he heard it and the Twin Kingdom would suffer quite a loss.

"Hmm, yeah. It's too strange for it to be a stroke of luck from an idiot. Just like it's too strange for it to be the plot of a smart mind playing the fool. But what's it all about then?"

Zenjirou did voice that question, but it rather seemed like he was talking to himself without expecting an answer.

"I do not know. If everything had neither been a coincidence nor a plot, then maybe it was a bit of both? Or else, there is more to it than meets the eye, an important objective that makes them disregard the disclosure of classified information?

Either way, we have too little information to speculate."

And in fact, the reply from Secretary Fabio contained nothing that could be viewed as a solution.

* * *

Around the time Zenjirou and Secretary Fabio were seriously engrossed in conversation, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona had returned to the southern building. An heated dialogue took place while they walked down the long hallway, even if they were talking past each other like always.

“Prince Francesco! Do not do something like today again. Please call for me as well when you are going to meet Her Majesty Aura or His Majesty Zenjirou.”

“Um, my bad. You looked so busy lately, so I just wanted to be nice to you, Bona. But it backfired. Okay, I will be more careful from now on.”

Strictly speaking, only Princess Bona was talking hot-blooded. Prince Francesco smiled friendly as ever as he answered unconcerned.

“Please do.”

She couldn’t neglect to scold him, since she acted as his chaperone, but neither could she rebuke the man all too severely, since he was older and higher ranked than herself. Although her expression indicated otherwise, Princess Bona contended herself with just that.

In the meantime, they reached a certain room.

In practice, Prince Francesco was staying alone in this first building, whereas Princess Bona had her lodging in the neighbouring second building, but right now, they had to discuss something urgent.

Princess Bona followed Prince Francesco through the door opened by the guards.

The interior of the room was cold to the point that just one step into it was enough to feel it.

It goes without saying that the Sharrow Royal Family permitted Prince Francesco and Princess Bona to take a few magic tools with them for a long stay in a foreign country, so that their daily life wasn’t affected in the least.

And it was one of these magic tools that chilled down the room.

A large, silver basin had been embedded with the spells “Fog Genesis” and “Wind Control”, which ensured that it constantly coughed up fog with the consistency of white fume and then let spring up a pleasant breeze.

The cooling effect wasn't as sweeping as from Zenjirou's air conditioning, since there was no magic that manipulated water temperature, but it still managed to convey the feeling of "sitting in the shade of a tree near a riverlet".

The foreign prince and princess heaved a deep sigh of relief when they got away from the unfamiliar stifling heat, and sat down on chairs facing each other.

Their wooden/vine chairs as well as the wooden table were all made here in the Carpa Kingdom. They weren't exactly uncomfortable, but definitely took a little getting used to.

Prince Francesco spoke while he shifted his bottom on top of the chair to find a better sitting position.

"Phew, bless the cold. Anyway, I am really sorry, Bona. But I do not think you need to be that angry. I mean, both my father and grandfather said it would be alright to disclose it as long as it earns us the jewels."

"The Crown Prince and His Majesty, respectively, actually said that the obtaining of the jewels takes highest priority and only in the worst case, we are to reveal classified information. No one said a single word about recklessly bandying classified information about."

Princess Bona corrected the conveniently repressed memory of the prince with a serious tone.

But the blonde prince did not even flinch.

"You are so naive, Bona. Naive in your opinion about how well my father and grandfather understand me. From the time when they allowed me to speak about the secret, they had already resigned themselves to the fact that I would blurt everything out on the first occasion.

After all, I am not smart enough to remember every little term. Both of them know that all too well."

Prince Francesco threw out his chest with an "Ehe～", whereas

Princess Bona slouched her shoulders crestfallen.

“Prince… That is not something to be proud of.”

Suppressing the dull pain surfacing at the back of head, she retorted quietly, but punctilious.

In her troubled mind floated the scene when the King and Crown Prince of her home country had entrusted her with this mission.

When she had accepted the “chaperone” mission, she had been surprised how large the offered reward was. Back then, she had trembled with excitement, thinking she had been entrusted with an accordingly important task, but maybe the abundant reward was just a “compensation for her troubles paid in advanced”?

She harboured such a doubt in her heart when Prince Francesco said with a sidelong glance at her without straining his beaming smile.

“Oh well, it is all water under the bridge now. More importantly, Bona, look at this. I received this from His Majesty Zenjirou. Great, right?”

He unfastened the red cloth that was wrapped around the bottle with distilled liquor on the table.

The colourless and transparent whisky bottle showed itself. It was filled with a liquid whose hue was close to transparent, the self-made “distilled liquor” from Zenjirou. But the content wasn’t important right now.

“D- Dear me!”

As expected, her eyes lighted up and she leaned forward towards the table. The moment she had gotten up from the chair, it rattled noisily, but she didn’t even notice it, let alone bothered with it.

“You can pick it up, but be careful. His Majesty Zenjirou said that it is very fragile. Hey, are you listening, Bona?”

“…..”

Without replying to him, Princess Bona reached out straightaway for the whiskey bottle, her eyes sparkling with passion. She carefully grabbed it with both hands as not to drop or knock it over, so she must have heard his warning at large.

Once she had pulled the bottle to in front of her and sat back into the chair, Princess Bona fixated her gaze on it intensively to the point that it seemed to be a waste to blink.

“So beautiful… What a flawless workmanship. Is it from the same material as these transparent jewels? And everything is so uniform, be it the pattern on the surface or the height and width, not to mention the lack of deformations. Just how was this made?”

“Uhm, Bona? Just to be clear, His Majesty Zenjirou gave that to me, not to you.”

Princess Bona’s hands clutched the whiskey bottle so tightly that one might worry that the distilled liquor inside would warm up, which prompted Prince Francesco to call out to her from the other side of the table worried.

“Prince Francesco!”

“Y- Yes?”

“Would you consider relinquishing this to me?”

Although he did anticipate her request, it was nevertheless an unexpected utterance from the princess, considering her usual demeanour.

Normally she was modest to a fault and hiding her own desires, but her attitude seemingly changed completely for anything related to jewellery.

“No, I certainly cannot do that. His Majesty Zenjirou personally ceded it to me. It would be rude if I passed it on to someone else right away.”

“Th- Then I will settle for this part on the edge.”

“No, no. If you break that out, the contents will spill. It will be completely useless to me with a hole!”

“If it is of no use to you, I will gladly take the rest as well!”

“No, hold your horses! I was speaking purely hypothetical and you cannot actually break it, okay? Please tell me you understand that.”

Should this be called a negotiation or just slapstick?

Either way, the usual roles for Prince Francesco and Princess Bona were reverted on a rare occasion and their skirmish lasted until the sanity of the princess recovered.

* * *

At night of the same day.

After dinner and bath, Zenjirou had changed into leisurewear and was now sitting across his wife Aura in their bedroom with the air conditioning, discussing the occurrences of today.

“I see… Prince Francesco really gave us a troublesome ‘slip of tongue‘. I cannot say if I should be happy or annoyed.”

Aura had listened to the whole story of the incident at noon, then she said that as she leaned into the backrest of her chair.

“But never minding how it came to be, you can call it a success that you managed to ascertain the effect of the marbles. You did well.”

“Thanks. Well, I didn’t really do anything and I can’t even take credit for it in my position. Aura, be honest with me. Do you think it was on purpose? I do agree with Fabio that it’s quite a tricky situation, because I happened to hear about it first when I was alone.”

“Hmm.”

Aura closed her eyes and mused.

“It definitely is troublesome. To be honest, it would have been a

hard blow, if not necessarily fatal, if my husband had been anyone other than you."

"Aura."

Zenjirou inadvertently smiled broadly in reaction to her words.

It had been a vote of confidence from his wife without doubt. On closer consideration however, the vote rather applied to his lack of ambition and desire.

In accordance with the universal values of this world, her words had by no means been a praise, but that was hardly any concern for Zenjirou.

He could say in confidence that something like that wasn't worth elaborating to the point, where it jeopardized the relationship with his beloved wife.

Aura returned the smile of her beaming husband while she leaned forward and continued to talk with both her arms resting on the table.

"For now I also agree with Fabio. At this point we have too little information to deliver judgment. Instead of paying undue attention to their potential intentions, we ought to focus on further verifying the information.

For example, we could hand one marble over to them and see if they can make a magic tool. And even while I really query whether it had been a pre-arranged ruse by Prince Francesco and Princess Bona, I cannot rule out its possibility.

Above all, I actually welcome it when the time for creating a magic tool can be reduced. Because I know how effective it will be to embed the 'Space-Time Magic' into magic tools, yet the required magical power and time are too expensefull so far when repeating the process numerous times."

Once she had finished her speech without a breather, she took the red Kiriko glass filled with ice water in hand.

To make a magic tool, you needed a practitioner of the Bestowal Magic as well as a practitioner of the magic you wished to embed into the magic tool.

Both practitioners could end up being one and the same person in case of simple elemental magic, but to embed the “Space-Time Magic”, Aura’s cooperation was absolutely necessary as she was currently the only practitioner of it.

And since she had a busy schedule as the Queen, it would be more than welcome if the cooperative work time could be cut down from one year to less than ten days.

“Well, it’s a good thing that you’re able to spend much less time on the creation of the magic tool, but wouldn’t it be a problem in itself when the work is done all too fast?

I’m afraid someone might even lift the lid on ‘my achievement’ if the information gets leaked by chance.”

Although he did acknowledge the virtue of her suggestion, Zenjirou had qualms about doing it. Aura put the red glass she had drunk from back onto the table and answered.

“We have no choice but to conceal it by delaying the publication for a year, even if it was actually done after a few days. Fortunately, it only involves four people: Prince Francesco, Princess Bona, you and me. The less people know about it, the easier it is to keep it a secret.”

“Are you sure? I mean, we’re talking about Prince Francesco here.”

The Queen hesitated quite unusually as her husband shot an extremely doubtful glance at her.

“Mh… Well, I admit that I am a little bit worried.”

“Just a little?”

“…Okay, quite a bit. But we ought to take a few chances here to get to the bottom of it.”

“Hmm, I’ll let you call the shots on these things. Do you have an idea already what kind of magic tool to request first?”

Zenjirou realized that Aura had already decided on a general course of action, so he shifted the topic to something else for now.

If she was set on testing the “secret technique” from the Sharrow Family by handing a marble over to them, then they had to decided what kind of magic tool they wanted to have made.

Aura seemingly had intended to discuss this question with Zenjirou as well. She leaned forward some more in such a way that her deep cleavage poked out of her thin nightgown, and began to talk.

“Yeah, that is a good question. Picking a powerful and versatile magic has a lot of merits, but considering that it might fall into the hands of an enemy one day, we cannot assume full risk.

The monopoly on the ‘Bloodline Magic’ lets the royal family stay in power after all. Embedding it into magic tools means to abandon its advantage, if not necessarily completely.

Just to be safe, we should request a ‘disposable’ magic tool, but then again, its applicability will be limited. It is a tough choice.”

Resting her chin in her hands on the table, his wife vented a sigh. Meanwhile, Zenjirou was over the moon with her revealed cleavage as he contributed ideas.

“Hmm, so it comes down to that after all. Then the hidden magic ‘Time Reversal’ and the most important ‘Teleportation’ are out of the question.

What else could be useful… Maybe ‘Great Barrier’ or ‘Effect Extension’?”

“Yes, something like that. And speaking of disposable ones, ‘Spatial Vibration’ is possible, too. It is one of the few destruction spells amongst the Space-Time Magic. Embedding it into a magic tool and keeping it at a fortress on the border will act as a deterrent.”

Aura answered like that and nodded satisfied after that.

Just like the name implied, Space-Time Magic was a magic that manipulated space and time to a certain degree. Due to that, there were a lot of useful spells for the everyday life, but in contrast, there were very few offensive spells.

“Oho. Anything else? …Ah, what about the ‘Summoning’ spell that brought me here? It’s not really a hidden magic, is it?”

Zenjirou had noticed that Aura didn’t want a precise answer from him, but rather various suggestion that stimulated her inspiration, so he mentioned everything that crossed his mind.

“That is too far-fetched. There is no point in embedding a magic that can only be used once or twice in thirty years with an appropriate constellation.”

“Well, it occurred to me before already, but we’ve ‘Time Reversal’ and ‘Time Acceleration’, right? What if we combined it with one of these? Perhaps it works even without the right constellation then.”

“Not a chance. Magic that manipulates time cannot be applied to something with magical power. You would only be able to summon something non-organic when you combine Summoning and Time Reversal.

Moreover, the ‘Time Reversal’ spell needs to be supplied with my magical power of several days through ‘Future Compensation’ even if I only want to wind back time for one year for the tiniest object. ‘Time Acceleration’ is not as bad as ‘Time Reversal’ in that aspect, but why would you go to the lengths of doing that to obtain something from the not so distant future?

Frankly speaking, it is not worth it.”

“Mhm, I see. Too bad.”

Zenjirou stared at the ceiling a bit regretful.

Through the combination of “Time Reversal” and “Future Compensation”, he had wanted to establish a connection to an internet hotspot.

The idea was to align a fingertip-sized airspace to a time with an appropriate constellation by means of “Time Reversal” or “Time Acceleration”, and then link it to Earth with the “World Bridge” spell.

At the same time, his computer and cell phone would be reverted to their state before he had cancelled his internet contract, through “Time Reversal”. By doing so, he had hoped to establish a connection to the internet, but that turned out to be nothing but wishful thinking.

(Too much of a good thing.)

Pulling himself together, Zenjirou still vocalized whatever come to mind.

“Oh, we might as well embed ‘Future Compensation’ then. The spell allows you to use your magical power of the future in advance, right? But you said there’s no such thing as ‘Past Compensation’, which would you allow to utilize the unspent magical power of the past.

But we might get a pseudo effect if it is possible to embed ‘Future Compensation’ into a magic tool. I mean…”

“Oh, I see. That certainly sounds viable. We would have to consult Prince Francesco for details, though…”

The royal couple continued their night chat until the cell phone played the music that signalized that it was time to go to bed.

Intermission 2: The Battle of the Dragonback Archery Knights

Around the time when Zenjirou was in the hot seat to entertain the prince and princess from the Twin Kingdom in the Royal Palace, the Dragonback Archery Knights led by General Puyol were fighting off the “Pack Dragons” that attacked them from both sides of the road in a distant region.

“Shoot!”

The knights drew their bows on the backs of their Raptorial Dragons and shot their arrows upon the signal from General Puyol.

“Gyah!?”

Dozens of fired arrows found their target: the bodies of the Pack Dragons. Although a few arrows hit nearby trees or fell harmless to the ground, most of the arrows on the scale of things pierced their intended targets.

“Wow… These are the Dragonback Archery Knights in action…”

Apart from the battlefield, Xavier whispered dreamily as he observed them.

Since the body of soldiers from the March of Guzzle led by Xavier himself, was devoting itself to the guard of the salt like promised, they wasn’t partaking in the battle.

Of course their guarding duty entailed fending off any Pack Dragons that approached them, but the way things were going, it didn’t seem likely they would get to swing their weapons at all.

Even if Xavier was technically standing on a battlefield, he was watching the battle unfold as a better observer instead.

The overall battle before his eyes was developing like his strategic

thinking had simulated.

The foot soldiers constrained the Pack Dragons with their spears while others stood ready at their sides with big, wooden shields to defend them.

The main offensive were the archers, firing arrows from behind them.

Their strategy was fundamentally the same as the one Xavier had employed against the Pack Dragons with his troops before.

But there were two major differences. First, the “Dragonback Archery Knights” fought true to their name, sitting on their Raptorial Dragons, and second, the shield bearers didn’t have to fortify the frontline so far, not even once.

“How can they control their Raptorial Dragons so successfully amidst all that howling of the Pack Dragons…”

It was only understandable that Xavier didn’t believe his eyes.

The Raptorial Dragon was actually a herbivore and thus a prey for the Pack Dragon, a carnivore.

Of course the trained Raptorial Dragons wouldn’t flee the scene, but it was still pretty thrilling to see how the archers had let go off the reins and wielded their bows with both hands as they sat on the backs of the Raptorial Dragons with only their feet in the stirrups.

The Raptorial Dragons stayed still, sensing the will of their riders even without the reins.

And the archers showcased precise shooting from an unsteady and weak stance in the stirrups.

Moreover, the majority of the bows used by the Archery Knights were “Dragon Bows”— a bow that an average soldier would even have trouble drawing on the ground.

It could be tallied well-intentioned as “amazing” for one or two people, but when all of the Archery Knights, counting up to over a

hundred, showed the same impressive competency, you couldn't help being struck dumb.

"Joseph."

Xavier kept his gaze on the battlefield in front of him while calling out to his father's retainer standing next to him.

"Yes?"

"Are you able to do that?"

The skilled knight answered the question of his young commandant frankly.

"Yes, I can. To be honest though, their skills are still a bit lacking, considering their fame on the South Continent.

Well, they were nearly wiped out in the previous war and when you consider the fact that they recovered in such a short time, they are still worthy of praise.

But as someone, who has seen the full potential of the 'Dragonback Archery Knights' during the war, I cannot help feeling a bit disheartened."

"Are you saying they were even better than that!?"

Xavier forgot all about the battle and exclaimed in surprise when his close aide practically found fault with them so casually.

"Indeed. If I had joined the Dragonback Archery Knights during the war, I would have ranked barely mid-table, but in their current condition, I am closer to their elite. Well, the young knights do have talent, they just lack experience and training.

I do not doubt that General Puyol will bring them back to the top of their form in the near future."

His statement was clearly based on the fact that he personally knew the soldier named Puyol Guillèn.

General Puyol as well as Knight Joseph had made a name for themselves in the previous war. It wouldn't be all surprising if they had fought together on the battlefield in the past.

In the corner of his mind, Xavier was thinking that he would like to ask him about it if he got the chance, while he focussed his attention and sight back onto the battlefield.

"I can see how good they are, but why is General Puyol letting them fight on top of the Raptorial Dragons? No matter how good they may be on dragonback, it's a fact that they lose accuracy compared to drawing on the ground.

I can't even imagine that someone as experienced as General Puyol would be overconfident in his soldiers and issue a meaningless command."

The doubt of the young commander was immediately clarified by the seasoned knight.

"The reason is to get the necessary altitude for shooting, because they can horizontally shoot above the heads of the foot soldier if they remain seated on the Raptorial Dragons."

"Oh, I see."

Xavier turned a bit red from embarrassment as the all too simple fact was pointed out to him.

Speaking of which, he now noticed that the archers were certainly firing arrows as one pleases without having to worry about the foot soldiers in front of them.

If the archers would get down onto the ground as well, they would surely have a lot less chances to shoot. "Taking up position on a high ground" was the basic of basics in ranged combat.

Xavier scolded himself for his obstinacy that had viewed the Raptorial Dragons only as a "means of transportation" and shook his head a bit. At that time, a particular howl he had heard before echoed from deep within the forest.

“GRUIII!”

“Xavier-sama!”

“Yes, over there!”

Knight Joseph and Xavier spotted the silhouette at the same time.

Even though the giant silhouette stood even deeper in the woods than the other Pack Dragons, it created the impression of being within one’s reach.

The abnormally large Pack Dragon led an abnormally abounding pack.

It goes without saying that General Puyol had noticed its existence as well, and was giving additional orders to his soldiers.

“Fourth Squad, enemy to your right, fire!”

However, the huge Pack Dragon reacted before the elite soldiers could implement the command of the general.

By the time the archers quickly had turned their Raptorial Dragons and nocked an arrow, the huge Pack Dragon had already vanished into the depth of the forest.

“Kii, Kii!”

“Gya, Gya!”

At the same time, all the other Pack Dragons were starting to retreat, too.

“Don’t give chase! Guarding the salt takes priority for now. But stay alert.”

“Yes, Sir!”

The knights reacted as quick as a wink to the orders of the general.

Thereafter nothing more happened and the wary General Puyol eventually gave the all-clear.

“Remove the corpses from the road. We move on as soon as the troops are lined up again. Anything to report?”

“No, General Puyol. We suffered no losses!”

Xavier stood at attention and answered General Puyol, who had come over after leaving the aftermath of the battle to his adjutant.

There had been no causalities on Xavier’s side. It was only natural, since not a single one of them had even gotten the chance to draw his weapon.

“Okay. We had no casualties either, but we used up more arrows than I had anticipated. If possible, I would like to stock up our supply at the March once we delivered the salt. Can you arrange it?”

In reaction to his question, Xavier threw out his chest and

“Yes, please leave it to me! Merchants affiliated with my family will be available at the settlement closest to the ‘Salt Road’. They are able to provide you with anything you need within an utmost short period of time.”

“…Oho.”

General Puyol raised an eyebrow in recognition, as the answer surprised him.

“Sir Xavier, you headed straight for the royal domain after the subjugation attempt, right?

In that case, did you arrange all that in advance?”

“Yes. I have made arrangements for unexpected loss or in case the subjugation were to drag on, but also for distributing the delivered salt all over the March as quickly as possible.”

“…..Ohoo.”

The gigantic general exclaimed in surprise again when he heard Xavier’s reply.

Before setting out for the subjugation, he had secured a supply line for any eventuality.

It would turn out to be a waste of money if everything went according to plan, so it had its pro and contra, but at least General Puyol seemingly deemed his action worthy of praise.

“A good call. Well done.”

“Always at your service!”

The praise from the hero of the previous war sparked the young successor to the Marquis to show a broad smile.

Chapter 03: Zenjirou's Mistake

Princess Bona was the chaperone for Prince Francesco.

Strictly speaking Prince Francesco acted as their representative, because his age and status were overwhelmingly higher, but everyone stopped addressing official matters to him after his tempestuous character became known on the third day since his arrival in the Carpa Kingdom.

As a result of this, the young Princess Bona had to shoulder the troublesome work by herself.

Furthermore, Prince Francesco wouldn't just sit still. One day he participated in a luncheon meeting and mistook people's names, the other day he attended a ball and stepped onto the dress of some lady. Every day he outdid himself.

Much as his simple-hearted character was excessive for his age, it fortunately prevented things from going out of hand, but incidents that had to be solved with a written apology or sometimes even with a little present, accumulated to no end.

The result of all this was that Princess Bona was busily engaged in duties every day, having no time for studying the foreign jewellery craftsmanship in depth like she had intended to.

But one person had sympathy for her circumstances. It was none other than the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom: Aura I.

"Ehm, did I hear right? You're saying Princess Bona's reaching her limit and I should solace her a bit?"

One night, Zenjirou lay heads-up on the bed in his blue pyjama already while he ascertained the proposal of his wife.

"Yes. This is generally true. To our regret, Prince Francesco is too difficult to deal with. If Princess Bona were to collapse, we would lose our point of contact with the delegation from the Twin Kingdom."

Aura, likewise in her nightgown, was sitting on the edge of the bed while she affirmed it to her husband with a nod.

Her expression looked a bit sullen.

Nearly half a month had passed by now. Aura had met with Prince Francesco and Princess Bona a couple of times so far, if not necessarily as often as Zenjirou, and realized how pointless it was to deal with the prince directly.

The question whether the conduct of the prince was false or honest, didn't matter on this occasion. You simply couldn't come to grips with him.

Unfortunately, Zenjirou had to fully agree with Aura on that.

He was the one, who was in the line of fire from Prince Francesco, so he knew all too well how cheerful and simple-minded the prince was, but also what a problematic case he represented.

"Well, it's a crucial time right now. You decided on the first magic tool, didn't you?"

"Yes. In the end, I settled on the 'Future Compensation'. It seems we can expect something really outstanding. According to Prince Francesco, it will even be possible to 'replenish' it. Though it will definitely be impossible to use it in instalments.

Anyway, I will be able to use my magical power more efficient then."

Zenjirou asked her by only lifting his head from the bed, whereas Aura turned around and answered him as she still sat on the edge of the bed.

Like its name implied, "Future Compensation" was a magic that allowed you to use your magical power of the future in advance to supplement your lack in magical power.

This desperate measure had been invented in order to activate the high-class "Space-Time Magic", which required ridiculous amounts of magical power to begin with, but if it could be embedded into a

standalone magic tool, a completely new mode of use became accessible.

Take, for example, the case of Aura using that magic today to embed a magic tool with the magical power worth of three days in the future.

From the next day on, she will be unable to utilize any magical power for three days. That by itself was no different from the usual application of “Future Compensation”.

However, by preserving her magical power in form of a “magical tool”, she can freely decide when she wants to use that magical power.

Moreover, the “replenish” function allows her to occasionally store the magical power of days, on which she doesn’t need to use magic, and use it to active a large magic one year later.

Of course there were various restrictions, such as: One would be unable to use magic for at least a whole day after embedding the magical power. Only the one, who embedded the magical power, would be able to use the stored magical power. And the stored magical power could only be used once as a whole. Nevertheless, the advantage of being able to store magical power was extremely large.

Prince Francesco and Princess Bona were already given one marble each for the creation of a magic tool.

The lying Zenjirou sat up and said.

“So, Prince Francesco will be occupied with the making of that ‘magic tool’ for a while?”

“Indeed. As from tomorrow, Princess Bona will be relieved from her ‘chaperone’ duties and have a break for a few days while Prince Francesco works on the magic tool.

From what I have heard, Prince Francesco also seems to pride himself quite a bit on the creation of magic tools, so he will carry on his job extremely diligent and sincerely.

Therefore, could you help Princess Bona relax, Zenjirou?"

"Mh? But in her eyes, I'm part of a foreign royalty, ain't I? Wouldn't it wear her out instead when I impose on her?"

As he mounted a sound argument, Aura nodded briefly.

"Yes, you are right. But Princess Bona has not been in our country for long. I fear that she would just rest in her own room, even if she gets some spare time."

"Sounds like a legit way to spend your break to me. To be honest, I'm a bit envious, because I've got so much work lately."

"Do not lie to me! Someone, who says that, would not have the self-discipline to voluntarily prepare a timetable and a list of answers to possible questions on the day before the task."

"Ugh…"

His wife talked him down with a playful tone, so he lapsed into silence somewhat disgruntled.

Still, he could think of nothing to riposte, because after coming into this world, he had started to realize that he was actually perceiving the "time he spent lazing around doing nothing" as torment.

Anyway, Aura continued to get the derailing topic back on track.

"Well then, on the first day you visit Princess Bona, you will show her some things from your world, like the weddings rings, for example.

If necessary, you may even let her borrow them for some time.

I am sure she will happily spent the rest of her spare time with honing her jewellery craftsmanship when you do that. After all, jewellery seems to be her purpose in life."

"Oh, I see."

Zenjirou agreed with Aura.

Speaking of, some of his co-workers at his previous company had been like that, too. The type of person, who dedicated their valuable holiday, which they only had once or twice per month, for their hobby and came to work on Monday with red eyes, but a “refreshed aura”.

Zenjirou didn’t had such a passionate hobby, so he didn’t know where they were coming from, but he had to acknowledge the fact that they were able to relax.

And Aura’s proposal made sense, considering that Princess Bona also belonged to that category, if not necessarily to such an extreme extent.

“Okay, then I can show her the wedding rings, the coins of my country and some beads?”

“Yes, sounds fine. I will leave the precise selection to you.”

“Good. Shall we turn in then?”

Ending the conversation at his own discretion, Zenjirou hit upon a little prank and moved over the bed to behind his wife sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Zenjirou?”

“Hehe!”

Then he embraced his beloved wife energetically from behind. His arms locked around her chest and his legs around her waist in the exact same manner as a koala was clinging to a branch of a tree.

After that, he rolled over and dragged his wife with him onto the bed.

“Here I go!”

“Ah, hey?”

Aura exclaimed troubled, but her face showed a smile. In the first place, it would have proven to be difficult for Zenjirou to pull Aura

even with all his might if she had actually resisted.

She was stronger than him and also heavier, since she hadn't lost all the extra kilos from her pregnancy yet, although she would never admit that out loud.

"Mm…"

Whether he was aware of that or not, Zenjirou embraced his beloved wife on top of the bed and put his face against her neck to get even more intimate with her.

"Jeez, what is up with you?"

As she was being held from behind, Aura only turned around her head to look at him, whereupon Zenjirou smiled cagey.

"You see, I'm so busy these days and get back to the inner palace late, so I've less chances to hug Zenkichi and was feeling lonely."

"Oh, I am just a substitute for Carlos?"

The Queen puckered her lips affected in a sulking manner upon the words from her husband.

And Zenjirou showed her an affectionate smile.

"No, no, I never said something that rude. To begin with, you two are completely different in size, weight…"

and softness, was how he had wanted to finish his sentence, but his words were cut off in the middle.

So far Aura had obediently abandoned herself to his arm like a spoiled lap dog, but she turned the tables on him in an instant, wriggling herself out of his arms and getting into a cowgirl position.

Apparently "weight" had been a taboo topic for his wife, since she hadn't lost her additional weight from the pregnancy yet.

"Aura…?"

Looking up to his wife, who was sitting on his abdomen with a smile, Zenjirou blinked with surprise.

Aura grinned humorous.

“Okay, I get it. Tonight I will be your replacement for Carlos. Give me a hug, Papa.”

“No, I said it‘s not like that…”

But Aura didn’t listen to him and flopped onto his chest just like that. Then she quickly pushed her arms beneath his back and hugged him tightly.

Oh, she’s making fun of me. Zenjirou came to that conclusion and played along with Aura’s “mischief” while cracking a smile.

“Ahaha, I don’t remember having such a big daughter.”

If possible, he would have liked to put his arms around her back and stroke her hair or pat her back, but unfortunately Aura was embracing him along with his arms.

“Papa, I love you～”

“Thanks. I love you, too. But could you let go for a bit? It hurts a little bit…”

“Papa～”

She ought to have heard it, but made no move to let go of him.

“Hey, Aura? Please release me, it hurts.”

Her voluminous and soft breasts pressed onto his thorax while her tender thighs squeezed his legs together. Moreover, she kissed him on the nape of his neck like a spoiled child.

It was supposed a cute prank of his beloved wife as she fawned on him.

But for some reason,

“Aura, I’m really feeling some pain here. Hey, let me go already. I give up. My arms are starting to get numb.”

“Papa～ Hug me. I love you, Papa!”

the ominous image of “being preyed on by a tigress” vividly floated in the back of his mind and wouldn’t leave him alone anymore.

* * *

A few days later.

Zenjirou visited the “second building in the south” that the Carpa Royal Family had rented out to Princess Bona.

He carried a small bag that contained the wedding rings, the wallet he had used in Japan and the pouch with beads.

(Oh man, I just can’t get used to the loose time measurement here.)

After being brought into a room with the words “please wait here”, he was sipping on the prepared cold tea while thinking to himself.

This world had no mechanic devices to measure time, so “appointments” turned out irritatingly vague for the perception of a person from the Modern Age.

Even if you arrived right on time according to your senses, it was common that you had to wait and the waiting person wasn’t even considering that as rude. No surprise, since there was no criteria for whose measurement of time was correct, considering the lack of a definite clock.

Still, everything had its limits.

(It feels rather long today.)

Zenjirou rolled up his sleeve and looked down on the wristwatch around his left arm.

10:18 AM

He had been brought into this waiting room around nine o'clock, so he was actually waiting for more than an hour already.

In fact, Zenjirou was a person of noble rank, namely the Prince Consort. Even if a vague timeframe was the norm in this world, he had never experience such a long delay before.

(Hmm, if anything, I would have said that Princess Bona's the type that doesn't make others wait. Was I wrong? Or did something happen?)

In these cases, it was typical to provide company for the guest so that he didn't get bored, but Zenjirou had turned it down in the beginning, because it was too troublesome.

Around the time he started to feel so bored that he regretted that decision a bit, the door was knocked.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty Zenjirou. Princess Bona awaits you now. Please follow me."

A messenger finally appeared to inform him about his reception.

"M- My deepest apologizes for making you wait for so long. I am most honoured that you have went out of your way to visit me today."

"….."

Guided to another room, Zenjirou was suddenly at a loss for words in front of a girl, who had deeply lowered her head.

"Ehm… Princess Bona…?"

"Y- Yes…"

Zenjirou had called her name to be sure, whereupon the girl in front of him ducked her head and affirmed with a weak voice.

"Well, how should I put it…"

Fully aware of how rude it was, he eyed the girl up.

Her slender body was clad in light purple, one-piece dress with few ornaments.

Her face was chiselled, but plain without any special traits.

So far, so good. All of that was nothing to new to the Princess Bona, whom he had met numerous times already. The issue was located higher up.

Her entire hair had been tied together into one bundle. A ponytail with an extremely short knot, if you will so. No, not quite. It wasn't elaborated enough to call it a "hairdo". The hair was merely tied back because it had been in the way.

On a closer look, the tied hair wasn't held together by a fancy ribbon, but rather a small hemp cord. Furthermore, strands of hair escaped from the bundle here and there.

To be honest, it looked sleazy. Her appearance was unsuited to welcome the royalty from a foreign country, even if it happened in her private chamber.

Kindness dictated that you overlooked some minor flaws, but not saying anything in this case would make it awkward instead.

"Ehm… Would you explain the circumstances to me?"

"…Yes."

Princess Bona nodded resigned.

For now, they sat down opposite each other on the couches and Zenjirou listened to the full explanation from Princess Bona, whose white skin had turned bright red up to her throat due to shame.

"I see."

"….."

Although he gave Princess Bona, who was trembling her tightly squeezed fists on her lap, a pitying look, he still put a summary of what he had heard into words for confirmation.

“In other words, you had prepared yourself for my visit, early in the morning.”

“Yes.”

“But I arrived later than you had thought, so you had free time on your hands.”

“Y- Yes.”

“And then you told yourself ‘just for a little bit’ and started to work on the gravure of the brooch from last night.”

“…Yes.”

“On that occasion, you wanted to tie up your hair, since it was in the way, but your usual ribbon was nowhere to be seen, so you just used the hemp cord that was binding your tools.”

“That was careless of me…”

“After that, you became engrossed in your work and continued until the moment the waiting maid told you about my arrival.”

“M- My apologies.”

“Then you tried to untie your hair in a hurry, but your hair got entangled and the cord would not come off. Even the help of the waiting maids only made it worse. In the meantime, you were running low on time.

You were faced with two choices: Either make me wait even longer or meet me in your current appearance. In the end, we are here like this now.”

“…I have nothing to say in my defence.”

Zenjirou realized something in light of the girl with the tied up hair, who deeply bowed once again.

(Oh, I see. She’s one of them. The type of girl I saw in the science and engineering department of my university: ‘a hopeless girl who

has nothing but her hobby on her mind'.)

During his days at the university, he had spotted a couple of them.

As a general rule, young females favoured to use their limited resources of time and money on fashion or socialisation with their friends. However, a small fraction of women with a particular hobby ranked their hobby above fashion or socialisation.

That type of person was even more dominant amongst men, but there was a decisive difference between male and female hobbyists.

Namely: Female hobbyists still placed importance on outward appearance in their own way, unlike male hobbyists.

Even if men ignored fashion, they were still accepted as long as they maintained a certain level of hygiene, but the world was not that forgiving towards women, who didn't care for fashion.

It even goes as far as saying that women were only allowed to go out in public without make-up up until the age of twenty.

Therefore, female hobbyists had no choice but to pay money and attention to fashion to a certain degree in order to avoid the criticism of the world.

As a result, these women "mimicked" an ordinary person so well that you couldn't see through them when you only kept them company for a little while.

The girl sitting in front of Zenjirou was the perfect example, although her "mimicry" was turned off right now.

"….."

(What am I supposed to do now?)

Zenjirou got the urge to just return to the inner palace, pretending he never saw the girl trembling in silence, but escape was not an option, since this "informal meeting" counted as "work".

"Ehm, I cannot really tell you not to mind it, but I accept your

apology.

It will be alright as long as you are careful that something like this will not occur again in the future."

"Th- Thank you very much."

Princess Bona bowed down before Zenjirou like a village girl, who was shown mercy by the magistrate.

* * *

(Man, instead of faking an illness, she decide to apologize to me directly, so I thought she's honest to a fault or obstinate, but maybe she's just more 'crazy about her hobby' than I thought?)

Such thoughts were crossing his mind when he saw how Princess Bona's eyes lighted up as soon as he revealed the "wedding rings", the "beads" and the "coins" to her.

After her explanation, he had expected to hear her say: "I know it is selfish of me, but I ask you to postpone today's meeting because of this", but instead, Princess Bona had said "May I ask you then what brings you here today, seeing as you are willing to forgive me?" with upturned eyes, although she did turn bright red and hung her head in shame.

"Eh? Ah, yes, of course."

Truth be told, the answer left his mouth more out of reflex than out of comprehension of her unexpected utterance.

With an outward appearance that embodied strangeness as everything below her neck was neatly clad in a thin dress without sleeves whereas only her hairdo was unkempt, Princess Bona gazed at the beads or wedding rings exhibited before her on the table.

"Amazing. These transparent grains have almost the same size and shape. And there is even such a small hole in the very middle…"

Zenjirou observed Princess Bona in silence as she looked at the beads on the table with the eyes of a professional instead of the

typical excited look of women for jewellery.

Since she was looking down on the table, he was thus looking at the parting of her hair.

(Hmm, her hairdo's a complete mess, but she got the silver dust applied to it like always. All that glitter. But it's only natural, I guess. She properly prepared herself after all, even if she gave in to the temptation midway. …Mh?)

Amidst all the sparkling silver dust in her hair, he spotted a mass of silver that was too big to be called dust. It was slim and long, coiled like a chip of wood made by a woodcarving knife.

(Wait? Shavings from a carving knife? Didn't she say that she was working on a gravure just before? Maybe…)

Aside from the silver dust, a silver scrap similar to a splint from carving stuck to her hair.

Zenjirou's train of thought gained momentum when he noticed it.

Come to think of it, Princess Bona usually had her hair covered with silver dust. Moreover, her peculiar hairdo was straight halfway down, then turned wavy.

It probably was not a coincidence that the transition from straight to wavy seemed to be right around the part, where she had knotted her hair.

(Maybe her 'half-straight, half-wavy hair covered with silver dust' is actually just 'unruly hair, due to tying her hair back tightly, covered with silver scraps'?)

The true circumstances were probably not that deplorable, but the chances were high that she deliberately chose this kind of hairstyle, so that she didn't need to fix her hair every time there was a frizz or silver scrap.

Thinking back on it now, Princess Bona always had the same hairdo: silver dust sprinkled over partly straight and party wavy hair.

Having the same hairstyle all the time wasn't strange per se, but noble ladies at her age usually changed their hairstyle to match the theme of the party they were attending or the dress they were wearing on that day.

Following that line of thought, Zenjirou's idea gained credibility.

"Amazing. These coins are absolutely identical in size and shape as well. Your Majesty Zenjirou, would you be willing to tell me more about it?"

Apparently it was not enough for her to just evaluate it with her eyes. At some point, Princess Bona lifted her head and pleaded while looking him directly into the eyes.

"Yes, as much as I am possible to. But like I have mentioned to you before, I am a complete layman when it comes to jewellery, so I doubt the information I can give you will be anything like you expect."

"Not at all. I am grateful to you. Any trivia might spark an idea."

(Yep, dropping the topic of her hairstyle will be to our mutual advantage.)

Discerning that, Zenjirou deliberately turned a blind eye to anything related to her hairdo and went along with the subject as he sees fit.

The following conversation went smoothly as long as he averted his eyes from her hairdo.

"Oh, I get it. So they used diamonds to cut the diamonds. That sounds extremely simple, but that idea never occurred to me.

There are various problems unsolved, though. How would you pulverize the diamonds and how would you apply that powder to make a file? But once that is done, I might be able to process diamonds without relying on magic."

Princess Bona's smile was so vivid that you could almost see her excitement taking shape. Hooked by it, Zenjirou smiled back.

“I am glad that I could help. That said, are you unable to process diamonds with magic? I have heard that proficient earth magicians can cut diamonds with their magic.”

His clueless question prompted Princess Bona to show a wry smile.

“That is out of the question. I may be confident in my precise practice of earth magic, but my magical power is nowhere near enough to meddle with diamonds by means of magic.

On the other hand, people, who have sufficient magical power for it, tend to have trouble controlling it precisely, so only a few genius magicians are able to cut diamonds with magic, since they need to overcome that contradiction.

As far as I know Prince Francesco has not actually done it, but he should be able to.”

“Oho, that is impressive.”

Zenjirou met the unexpected high evaluation of Prince Francesco with genuine surprise.

To his knowledge, Queen Aura and the Royal Archmage Espaldion, not counting the infant Carlos Zenkichi, were the only ones in the Carpa Kingdom, who had more magical power than Princess Bona.

Having said that, Aura was a typical example for a magician that had a large amount of magical power, but lacked precise control over it, so she was out of the picture for now. As for Espaldion, he prided himself with a magical power that was greater than the average for royalty, but compared to Aura, that amount was probably still lacking.

According to that, one could tell how outstanding Prince Francesco was as a magician.

Princess Bona was unable to contain her mixed feelings while

“As you may know, he is a person with a lot of, well, quirks, but he definitely is a first-rate magician. I dare to say that my control is a bit better, but my magical power hopelessly outnumbered.

If anything, it is little short of a miracle that his control over such an enormous amount of magical power is only slightly inferior to mine."

she described the legitimate grandson of her King like that.

Although she herself wasn't aware of it, the same could be said about her, albeit lowering the sights a bit.

As a practitioner of the "bloodline magic", her magical power admittedly ranked at the bottom of royal standards, but she could call an abundant magical power her own when comparing it to any average magician out there.

On top of that, she had declared that her forte was the precise control over it, so her talent was more than outstanding.

Nonetheless, Princess Bona underestimated herself, whether that happened deliberately out of modesty or due to an undeserved self-assessment. In order to change the subject, she picked up a bead from the table.

"I have to say, these beads are truly a fascinating thing. The folk art in my country also includes handiwork, where small stones are chained together with a string, but they used coloured stones with holes for that. Naturally, none of the stones share the same shape or colour. Moreover, they are bigger than these most of the time, so they can only be used for bulky bracelets or necklaces.

In contrast, you have so many of the same size, shape and colour here. It would make an extremely beautiful handiwork."

"Yes, with enough practice, you are able to make all kind of things with it, such as rings, broaches or bracelets. I have a few templates, so would you like to try your hand at it, Princess Bona?"

The most favoured handiwork of beads in recent times were cell phone straps, but that would prove difficult to explain, so he omitted it.

"May I!? Thank you very much!!"

The conversation proceeded harmonious while they unconsciously grew closer to each other.

* * *

Aura had been worried about it before and with justification: Zenjirou and Princess Bona had a good chemistry.

Zenjirou was born into an average family on Earth and then had unexpectedly acceded the position of the Prince Consort. Princess Bona hailed from a lower ranked noble family and was welcomed into the royal family when she atavistically awakened to the "Bestowal Magic".

On top of that, both were diligent in nature, smart enough to understand their own standing and even had a rationality that made them act appropriate to their status.

In short, they sympathised on the fact that they both had went through the "trouble of climbing the social ladder", even if under slightly different circumstances.

"Eh? Then you lived with your parents until you were ten years old?"

"Yes. I was accepted into the royal family when I turned ten. Before that, I was raised as any other second daughter of a lower ranked noble.

Though I do admit that my parents had high expectations of me, since I had an exceptional magical power despite being the daughter of a lower noble."

"I see. Then it must have been quite an ruckus when you were acknowledged as royalty?"

"And how! It took several days to recognize it as reality, for me as well as for my family."

According to her, the Twin Kingdom examined those born into higher nobility with a magical power on par with royalty when they started to recognize the world around them, but the status of

Princess Bona's family had been too low for that.

Due to that, her aptitude wasn't discovered until her tenth year of age.

Incidentally, her case triggered the other lower ranked nobles to hope that maybe their child was the same, but to their dismay, that was not the case.

"So you learned the 'Bestowal Magic' within six years? And the jewellery workmanship, too?"

In reaction to Zenjirou's admiring tone, Princess Bona replied with an embarrassed smile, which was a mixture of modesty and pride.

"Yes, I had a tough row to hoe. Though I would say that it was more difficult to learn manners and speech. The royal etiquette is completely different after all, even if I was born into lower nobility."

"I can relate."

Zenjirou inadvertently expressed his genuine consent.

"In contrast, I had fun learning the 'Bestowal Magic' and jewellery craftsmanship. It gave me a sense of accomplishment. Nevertheless, it was difficult in its own way. And naturally, I still have much to learn."

Right now she was sixteen years old. She had started to study when she was ten. It was quite praiseworthy that she had obtained a full-fledged skill within six years.

The various branch families of the Sharrow Royal Family had brought up even younger professionals for jewellery, armaments or bestowal magic, but they had learned their practice from the cradle. Princess Bona had a later start than them.

Engrossed in thoughts like that, Zenjirou noticed something strange.

"Then what about Prince Francesco?"

“Yes, he was acknowledged as a full-fledged practitioner of the Bestowal Magic at the age of twelve. In addition, he also has mastered the crafts of jewellery and armaments, so he definitely is an authority on these fields of expertise.”

Her wry smile showed a tinge of jealousy, but Zenjirou was in no shape to notice that.

(I knew it! That means he received the education of the branch family from the very beginning, even though he’s a direct descendant.)

Unlike the branch families, direct descendants of the royal family weren’t obligated to learn the skills to craft armaments or jewellery, instead they got drubbed the “bloodline magic” into them.

Of course the magic wasn’t learned in a day or two either, but the years of study for the jewellery and armaments craftsmanship were several times of it.

After spending years of grappling with iron and silver day in and day out, you started to get the hang of the craft.

There was no way that a direct descendant, a key element of the country, could spare all that time for it. There were many other things he ought to learn if he had free time on his hands.

However, Prince Francesco had not only learned the Bestowal Magic from a young age on, but likewise mastered the craftsmanship of jewellery and armaments. Unless he was some kind of abnormal genius, it meant that he was made to study all of it as early as possible.

(In other words, he already got stripped of his right to ascend the throne in the future when he was practically still a baby. And then it doesn’t make sense to blame his ‘stupidity’ for depriving him of that right.)

If someone were to give up on a young child for the reason of being “stupid”, that person would be far more stupid instead.

There was no doubt that the birth of Prince Francesco was shrouded

in some kind of mystery.

(I'll tell Aura about it later.)

"Sounds like Prince Francesco sure is blessed with an excellent talent."

Zenjirou made a mental note of it and gave his consent to Princess Bona just because.

His reply had been little short of half-hearted, because he was woolgathering, but mercifully, Princess Bona didn't seem to suspect anything.

"Indeed. I have taken my cue for being a maker of magic tools from him.

Anyway, this ring is truly the most eye-catching item. The more I look at it, the more fascinated I get by its perfect handiwork… This obviously applies to the three uniform diamonds, but also to the well-elaborated socket. Just how did they manage to make such a detailed pattern?"

As she once again shifted her attention towards the wedding ring, Zenjirou thankfully took up the thread of the conversation.

"Believe it or not, but the total number of this repeating, reticulated pattern is exactly the same for both rings."

He was just repeating what he had heard from the clerk at the jewellery shop, but Princess Bona was most surprised by that information.

"Really!? One, two, three…"

She pinched one ring between the middle finger and thumb of her right hand, brought it closer to her face and started to count the patterns on the socket with all her might.

Having said that, the reticulated pattern on the ring was not something that could be counted with the naked eye.

Even so, Princess Bona was trying with her whole heart. Seeing that, Zenjirou's kindness was triggered unnecessarily.

Much to his chagrin and much to her joy, the "coins" were laying on the table within sight at that time.

(Oh, I know.)

His usual wariness and tension had dropped considerable, so he put the idea he just thought of, into action without any hesitation.

"Excuse me for a bit."

With a short utterance, he picked up a five yen coin from the table with his left hand, then scooped a drop of water from the refreshing drink with the fingertip of the little finger of his right hand and carefully dribbled that drop into the hole of the five yen coin.

"Mm, nope. It's a concave lens. Once more… Good, now it worked."

After a few failures, the drop of water completely filled the hole of the coin, like he had intended to, and formed a little convex lens.

"Mhm, okay, all done. Princess Bona, please use this. You should be able to see a bit better with it. Hold it carefully and look at the ring through the hole in the middle of the coin."

"Eh? Okay."

So far Princess Bona had desperately counted the patterns on the ring, but now she obediently followed his instructions, took the coin and looked through the opening at the ring.

Her following reaction was sweeping.

"Eh? EH!? What is this!?"

She exclaimed in surprise when she saw the world through a convex lens for the first time.

Zenjirou was happy that her reaction was exactly like what he had expected, so he answered her somewhat elated.

“It’s a water lens. It makes things appear bigger by making use of the light refraction effect. You know how the riverbed looks distorted when you look at it from above through the clear surface? It’s the same principle.”

“Ehh? It appears to be so big just by looking through water?”

“Not quite. It’s not only the water. Its shape is important, namely a disc shape, where the middle is inflated and gradually flattens towards the edge.”

Princess Bona eagerly listened to his clumsy explanation and then suddenly chanted a spell while she breathed heavily due to her excitement.

“Mhm… Maybe like this? ‘O, water in the vessel, gather at my fingertip and take he shape I desire for a short while. As compensation, I make one-hundred and fifty-six offerings of magical power to the water spirit.’”

“EH!?”

This time it was Zenjirou, who exclaimed in surprise.

When she smoothly chanted the spell with her index finger on the surface of the water in her glass, a portion of the water contorted itself like slime and shaped a lens in the size of a magnifying glass at her fingertip in no time.

“Oh, wow. This is really amazing, Your Majesty Zenjirou!”

The moment she confirmed the effect of the simple water lens she had made with her own water magic, she forgot all her manners and called out innocently.

“…..”

On the other hand, Zenjirou had lost his composure to react to her.

(Oh shit. Now I’ve done it…!)

He noticed his mistake all too late and broke out in a cold sweat all over his back way after the fact.

But Princess Bona was too excited to notice his behaviour and was looking at the magnified texture of the table with the water lens

when the magic wore off in the middle of it.

“Aw.”

Out of magic, the water lens suddenly dissolved and dropped onto the table with a splash.

“My apologies. That was impolite of me.

As excepted, the short duration effect of normal magic is impractical. And the ‘Full Water Reshaping’ magic consumes too much magical power. If we create a specialized magic and turn it into a magic tool…

Your Majesty Zenjirou, thank you very much!”

It goes without saying that Princess Bona was naturally thinking along the same lines that Zenjirou had feared.

Developing a magic that shaped water into a lens and embedding that very magic into a magic tool meant that the Twin Kingdom was going to monopolize the important technology called lens.

(Damn! I screwed up big time. I’ve gotta confess myself guilt to Aura and perform damage control.)

“No problem. I am glad that I could help.”

Zenjirou was shaken at his unprecedented mistake and it took all of his willpower to at least reply as a formality.

* * *

At night of the same day, Zenjirou had returned to the inner palace and reported the incident during his meeting with Princess Bona to Aura at full length with a meek expression.

He had deemed the subject inappropriate for the comfortable bedroom with air conditioning, so they were, once again after a long time, sitting on the couches in the living room at his request.

“Hmm, I would say you did quite well in getting Princess Bona to

show her true colours and obtaining some information on the mystery behind the birth of Prince Francesco, but why are you so crestfallen? Does it really pose such a big problem when the Twin Kingdom realized that so-called lens?"

After Aura had listened to his repentance-like report, she crossed her legs anew as she sat on the couch and inclined her head uncomprehendingly.

Zenjirou had anticipated her reaction to some degree.

It definitely didn't seem to pose such a great threat, since a single convex lens could only be used as a magnifying glass. At best, it would make the work of craftsmen like Princess Bona more "convenient".

As a matter of fact, Princess Bona had admittedly been impressed on a large scale, but hadn't shown doubt in the least. In other words, she had recognized it as something trivial not worth a suspicion, even when he generously had told her about it for free.

However, the potential of the lens wasn't that tiny. And Zenjirou was aware of it.

Although he had been aware of it, he had carelessly spilled the knowledge to a most dangerous person of influence, so he regretted his own action all the more.

He took out the five yen coin and started to explain again.

"Okay, look here. First off, this is the convex lens I showed to Princess Bona. You see how it's inflated in the middle and gradually flattens towards the edge?"

"Yes, the view beyond it really looks enlarged. How convenient."

Aura peeked through the five yen coin lens held out by him, and nodded impressed once again, but wasn't really worried about it after all.

Zenjirou then shook the coin once to remove the water and filled it with an even smaller drop of water than before.

“And this is a concave lens. Now it’s the other way round: The middle is the thinnest part and the edge is thick. Everything looks smaller now, right?”

“Certainly. But how is that useful?”

She asked him a question, but Zenjirou told her “wait a sec” with a side glance and stood up from the couch, moving into a corner of the living room.

All the stuff he had brought with him from Earth, but didn’t use all that often, were stored there inside a box.

“Ehm, where did I put it… Ah, there it is.”

He rummaged in the opened box for a while, then suddenly pulled out something that was wrapped in an elongated cloth coloured in fancy blue, white and red.

“The good ol’ fan merchandise from my university. I got rid of my fan tricot and cell phone strap when I joined my old company, but I’m glad I kept at least the terrycloth scarf and binocular.”

Technically, only the terrycloth scarf was a fan merchandise. The binocular was a run-of-the-mill merchandise that he had only used to watch the training matches, but that wasn’t really worth mentioning now.

Zenjirou put the terrycloth scarf, which had written “YOKOHAMA” in Latin letters on it, back into the box and returned to the couch, where his wife was waiting, with only the collapsible binocular in hand.

“Zenjirou?”

“Here, look at this. It’s the result of combining a convex and concave lens. Well, just putting them together won’t get you a clear vision like this, instead everything would look mirror-inverted and bottom up, but it brings its consequences home to you at any rate.”

With these words, Zenjirou folded out the binocular, adjusted the focus briefly and handed it over to Aura.

Seeing as it was night right now, she couldn't look outside, but the living room was large enough and the binoculars only had a triple magnification, so its function could be experienced well here, too.

"Wha!? What is this!?"

When Aura had looked through the binocular like Zenjirou had told her, she exclaimed in surprise as expected.

"It enlarges things threefold, but depending on the lenses, you can get even more.

At this point in time, Princess Bona only knows about the convex lens and I don't think she'll hit upon the idea to combine the convex and concave lens any time soon, but at a practical level, it's possible to make it happen at once."

In fact, even on Earth there had been a large gap between the development of the lens and the development of "telescopes" and "microscopes", which utilized the combination of lenses.

Considering that, it might be overhasty to panic about it, but excessive optimism was risky.

Aura peeked a few times through the binocular and pondered wordless for a while.

A device that allowed you to see faraway things enlarged. If the main component of it, aka the "lens", could only be applied through magic tools, then the Twin Kingdom would obviously have a monopoly on it.

Before long, Aura seemed to have reached a conclusion and she showed Zenjirou an unusual strict expression as she spoke.

"You are right. You did make a 'mistake'."

"Uh… Sorry."

As her husband apologized honestly, Aura shook her head a bit, whereby her long red hair swung back and forth, and sighed.

“Well, what is done cannot be undone, but the circumstances seem a bit too complicated to just brush it off with that.

We have more or less two ways to cope with it: The first method would be to negotiate with them to ultimately get our own magic tool for the water lens, but the better alternative would be to establish the same manufacture process in our Carpa Kingdom by utilizing the ‘Bestowal Magic’ laying dormant in your blood.”

The conversation started to turn into a disappointing direction in line with his expectations, so Zenjirou tabled his own idea as to oppose it.

“Or else we can give the glass manufacture greater attention. This binocular may be made out of something else, namely hard plastic, but lenses in my world are principally made out of glass.

As such, we just have to establish a glass manufacture and teach the craftsmen how to shape the glass into a lens at the same time, then the value of the lens will drop from a ‘magic tool’ to a ‘high-class tool’.”

Apparently had he thought about countermeasures from the time of his “mistake” until now, seeing as he fluently presented his own plan.

“Oh, I see. That is worth considering as well. But before anything else, we have to do something about you first.

This incident finally convinced me. Zenjirou, you are being imprudent around Princess Bona, abnormally so at that. Are you aware of that?”

Zenjirou was at a loss for words when his wife pointed it out strictly.

She had said that he was being careless around a certain woman. That piece of information wasn’t meant reproaching, but stimulated a guilty consciousness within him. Even more so, since he admitted the truth behind in.

Zenjirou answered her somehow without averting his eyes, albeit

stuttering.

“Yes, that’s, well, right. I’m aware… of it, I guess? What can I say… She’s really easy to talk to. We’re kinda on the same wavelength and get along well…”

“Mhm…”

As her husband was vindicating himself, Aura put a hand against her chin and mused. At least he was aware of it himself, so he wouldn’t mistake it as jealousy when she pressed him hard.

Once her thoughts had reached that point, she became aware that she was afraid of getting hated by him, and smiled bitterly at heart.

The Queen never had been a person, who let her thoughts show on her face.

“That makes things easier. Forgive me, Zenjirou, but I am forbidding you to meet with Princess Bona by yourself from now on.

This incident might as well repeat itself otherwise, even if you do not intend for it and she may have no hidden motive.”

She sternly declared without batting an eye.

Personally, Zenjirou didn’t need to be reminded about it.

Sure, he had enjoyed the conversation with Princess Bona as he got along with her, but he was not going to persist on them when it actually disadvantaged the country.

“Yeah, okay. From now on, I’ll only meet with Princess Bona when she’s acting as the ‘chaperone for Prince Francesco’.”

“Yes, please do so. Forgive me for contradicting myself now, seeing as it was me, who suggested that you go see Princess Bona in the first place.”

“Nah, don’t worry. It might’ve turned out like this now, but your decision was right back then. The biggest problem is my weakness,

so I should be apologizing, not you."

"Mm, fine."

The calm response of her husband prompted the red-haired Queen to heave a small sigh of relief to herself.

* * *

Deep in the night. Once Queen Aura had confirmed that her husband was sound asleep in the same bed, she quietly slipped out of the bedroom and went to the living room next door.

Amidst the darkness of the living room, she fumbled for the LED floor lamp and switched it on.

"!"

The white light of the LED was too bright for her eyes accustomed to darkness. Aura blinked a few times and by the time her eyes got used to the bright light, the entrance door of the living room was lightly knocked three times.

"Good. Come in."

"Yes, excuse me."

The one, who entered with her permission, was a waiting maid with unusual blonde hair for a citizen of the Carpa Kingdom.

Her official appointment only advertised her as one of the young waiting maids, but in reality, she was an secret key figure with a wide information network amongst the waiting maids in the inner and royal palace. Along with the Royal Archmage Espaldion and Secretary Fabio, she was one of the trusted retainers of Queen Aura.

Aura sat down on the black leather couch in her thin nightgown, then spoke in a rough tone.

"Your report."

"Yes. According to the waiting maids we dispatched to Princess

Bona, Princess Bona has shown no attempts to seduce Zenjirou-sama."

"Mhm. Then she herself really has no ulterior motive?"

Hearing the report, Aura mused in the thinker's pose.

She had pretty much come to terms with the fact that the Sharrow Royal Family would aim at Zenjirou's lineage.

Even if the best time for it would be his visit to the royal palace of the Twin Kingdom as soon as he learned the "Teleport" magic, she had been on the watch, thinking Princess Bona was going to make some kind of move while she staying here, but nothing of the sort had been reported so far.

Even today Zenjirou, their target, had gone to her temporary lodging all by himself. It had been the perfect opportunity, so Aura had worried that she would do something, but the report just now denied it.

"Still, my husband hits if off with Princess Bona very well. Is it just a coincidence? But the Twin Kingdom is faraway on the central part of the southern continent, so they should not know about his type of woman…"

As a matter of fact, not even the nobility of the Carpa Kingdom, who were pushing for a concubine, had a real grasp on his type of woman. If anything, the only clue was that he was pretty intimate with Queen Aura, but she and Princess Bona had not really anything in common.

All her thoughts didn't get her anywhere. Still, she couldn't help but feel worried about the close association between Zenjirou and Princess Bona, although she wasn't going to use the illogical concept of a "woman's intuition" to justify that worry.

Zenjirou hadn't been that lax with anyone before. Not with Lady Octavia, who was famous for her beauty in the royal palace. Not with Fatima Guillén, who brimmed over with confidence and youth. And not even with the waiting maids of the inner palace, who were

interacting with him every day.

To be honest, Aura was well aware that her caution was fuelled by the green-eyed sentiment of a woman.

As the Queen however, she fortunately had the right to restrict the relationship of her Prince Consort with a foreign princess.

Even if she was unable to prevent him from taking concubines one day, the first one definitely shouldn't be a princess from a foreign country.

"Okay. Tell the waiting maids to report anything anomalous from now on, too. But we do not want to raise any suspicion in Princess Bona's mind, so I do not need a periodical report.

They are primary to act like faithful waiting maids, who listen to her."

Although she admitted that her behaviour was controlled by a womanly emotion, she persuaded herself that her actions were justified.

The blonde waiting maid, standing in front of her, showed a brief smile, as she noticed the unusual feminine reaction of the Queen.

"…Very well."

But before Aura saw anything, the maid smoothed her facial features again and quietly left the room after she had bowed once, so that her long blonde hair shifted.

Intermission 3: A Quiet Road

The combined forces of the Dragonback Archery Knights, led by General Puyol, and the soldiers from the March of Guzzle, led by Xavier, were marching orderly along the quiet road.

They had already crossed over the “Salt Road” once to deliver the supply of salt to the March of Guzzle and were now on their way back. Because they had replenished their supply of arrows and food as planned, the carriages were packed and slow, but the strain on the foots soldiers lessened in turn.

“It’s so quiet…”

Now allowed to ride next to General Puyol, who he had taken a liking to him, Xavier called out to the general of the Kingdom riding a big Raptorial Raptor close by.

The sturdily built general answered the question of the young successor to the march with a short nod.

“Indeed. Too quiet for my liking. This doesn’t look good.”

“You mean they are wary of us?”

General Puyol confirmed Xavier’s concern.

“Yeah. If they’re wary of ‘humans in general’ now, we could pack up and go home, but if they’re just wary of ‘armed forces’ or ‘us in particular’, it only complicates our mission.”

“The hunters familiar with Pack Dragons said that the dragons get smarter with age.”

Xavier’s pointer made General Puyol click his tongue, albeit keeping his inexpressive look.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Then we better discard the optimistic view that they might be wary of humans in general, Xavier-dono.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Sensible to the change in the tone of the general's voice, Xavier straightened his back on top of his Raptorial Dragon.

"We'll split up into small groups now and advance at a fair distance. You keep command of your soldiers, but make sure that you're staying in range of the alert whistle."

"As you command, General. In other words, I'm acting as a decoy?"

General Puyol confirmed his question.

"Yes. Or to be more precise, we all will act as a decoy. We'll split into several groups of different sizes, but more or less equal fighting strength. Your group of soldiers will be embody the largest unit, so I doubt that you'll get attacked, but it goes without saying that you stay alert."

"Aye-aye, Sir!"

Xavier saluted from atop his dragon.

As a side note, the small unit led by General Puyol was the one with the "fewest" soldiers, but considering their equipment and skills as well as the fighting strength and leadership ability of the general himself, it was still superior to Xavier's unit in terms of combat power.

If the Pack Dragons then attacked the general's unit, things would turn out well, because it would mean that the dragons were merely wary of "quantity". If, however, they were to attack Xavier's unit instead, it meant that the Pack Dragons were also wary of their "fighting capacity", being mindful of their equipment, skills and such, not just the numbers of soldiers.

"All hands, stop! I'll subdivide our troops into units now, so every officer is to report for duty."

Hopefully nothing bad would happen. General Puyol gave his orders to the soldiers in a matter-of-fact way without voicing that concern.

* * *

A few hours later.

Thankfully the “worst case scenario” General Puyol had envisioned, didn’t take place.

The Pack Dragons attacked the unit led by the general himself, which was the smallest, yet the strongest.

“GRAAR!”

“All hands, formation circle! Reinforcements are notified! No need to attack recklessly! Concentrate on defending until they arrive!”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Roger that!”

The elite unit under the command of Genera Puyol reacted as expected. Not a single soldier panicked when the Pack Dragons attacked. The shield and spear soldiers respectively shaped a defensive circle around the general with the archers standing in the middle.

That said, one couldn’t expect the archers to shine like last time, where the shield and spear soldiers didn’t have to act, because they were fewer in numbers now. With fewer people, the circle ended up being smaller, which in turn reduced the distance to the enemy. And to avoid the risk of losing control over their dragons in that situation, the archers had furthermore unsaddled.

In the manner of a textbook pattern, the foremost soldiers blocked the attacks of the Pack Dragons with their large wooden shields, the spearmen thrust their spears at the dragons from between the gaps of these shields and the archers shot arrows above their heads from behind.

The elite soldiers fought well in accordance with their reputation. The situation was completely under control, so General Puyol had barely anything to do after he gave the initial orders.

Nevertheless, it was rather unthinkable that the battle would end without a single mistake from a soldier.

“RWAR!”

“Agh?”

At an unpropitious moment, the Pack Dragon turned its head when a soldier thrust his spear at it, repelling the spear greatly. Moreover, the soldier lost grip of the spear and it spun towards the middle of the circle.

Even as an elite, each soldier had his hands full with his own issues amongst the battle. It happened when all hope seemed lost.

“Hah!”

General Puyol had been silent on his Raptorial Dragon so far, but suddenly he raised a war cry, jumped out of his saddle high into the air and caught the spear that was going over his head with his bare hands.

But it didn’t end there.

“Ngh!”

Believe it or not, the general turned the spear in his hand in midair and quickly threw it at the uproarious Pack Dragon outside the circle.

“GWAR!?”

The downward thrown spear found its target and pierced the skull of the dragon, impaling it to the ground.

“G-GRR!”

Having said that, a Pack Dragon often escaped death even with a spear through his head as its brain was rather small. Like it or not, the same applied to this dragon. Nonetheless, the dragon couldn’t get the spear to even move an inch with all its might, so powerful it had been thrown.

“…..”

Although the soldiers knew all about the capability of their general, they were speechless and forgot about the battle for a moment when he once again displayed his skills.

“Attention!”

“Y- Yes!”

Yet General Puyol got them back into shape with a single word.

In the end, the unit led by the general continued to hold on without any casualties until the reinforcements notified by the whistle arrived.

As planned, they had lured in the Pack Dragons, killed a few of them and regrouped without problems.

At first sight, it looked like a perfect achievement, but General Puyol was wearing a grim expression.

“General Puyol, we have finished clearing the road. We can march on according to schedule.”

“Good. Well done, Xavier-dono.”

At some point, Xavier had established himself as the vice-commander and General Puyol briefly appreciated his report.

“General Puyol? Is something the matter?”

Xavier quickly noticed the change in the behaviour of the general and asked.

In turn, General Puyol knitted his thick brows and tried to confirm.

“Xavier-dono.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“You have fought this lot with your troops before, right?”

He didn’t quite understand the purpose of the question, but Xavier had nothing to hide, so he answered the general truthfully, never mind that he was doubtful at heart.

“Indeed. They attacked by surprise, but we somehow managed to drive them off with minimal casualties.”

“How many of them did you finish off at that time?”

“Hmm, about five, I would say.”

Upon his reply, General Puyol nodded a few times, saying “I knew it” to himself.

“There is no doubt that the pack that attacked you, amounted to around fifty dragons?”

“Yes. Half of them had hidden in the shadows and they attacked from both sides of the road, so we could not count them accurately, but according to the report of my subordinates, that number seems more or less correct.”

“Okay. Do you remember then how large the pack was that attacked us on our way to deliver the salt to the March? It was led by the same huge Pack Dragon, by the way.”

“Yes, it consisted of nearly fifty dragons, too.”

While he answered, Xavier, too, suddenly realized why the general was knitting his brows.

As he looked into Xavier’s tense face from above, General Puyol continued his remark.

“In this battle, our troops have finished off fourteen dragons. This was their third attack and was staged by… around fifty dragons.”

The elite unit under the command of General Puyol had killed four of them, but that number was unimportant right now.

“…..”

The problematic issue was that the number of attacking dragons was always “around fifty”.

So far, the pack had attacked three times.

The first time, it had been “around fifty” dragons, of which five had been killed.

The second time, it had been “around fifty” dragons again, of which fourteen had been slain.

So far, so good. They never had an accurate grasp of their numbers to begin with. Everything would add up when the pack amounted to fifty-five on their first attack, of which five were killed, still leaving fifty dragons for the second wave.

However, the third assault was yet again performed by “around fifty” dragons, so the numbers by no means computed.

Assuming that their had been fifty-five dragons at the beginning, the second wave had fifty dragons left and the third one thirty-six.

It certainly was a bit far-stretched to mistake that number for “around fifty”.

“I’m afraid that the huge Pack Dragon isn’t leading a pack as harmless as mere fifty dragons. That number probably is just perfect for hunting. The fact that there’s no young dragon amongst the dead backs up this theory. Same might apply to female dragons.”

Xavier swallowed his saliva with a gulp, because he comprehended what the general was getting at.

“How large is the pack in your opinion then?”

His question made General Puyol frown.

“Who knows. Less than hundred is out of the question. But I’ve no idea whether there are two-hundred, three-hundred or even five-hundred. The worst of it is that they’re only attacking with just fifty dragons while keeping so many in reserve. On top of that, we might have made them only warier with our last tactic.”

“And if they do not attack us, we will have to go look for them ourselves…”

“Exactly. The Dragonback Archery Knights may be skilled, but they are undersized. I had concluded that they alone would suffice against a pack of fifty dragons, even for a chase, but I was too optimistic. We have no choice but to call for reinforcements from the capital.”

General Puyol casually mentioned the conclusion Xavier didn’t dare to voice.

“A- Are you sure?”

Calling for reinforcements was basically the same as announcing that the situation was “beyond one’s capabilities”.

Xavier considered that decision humiliating for General Puyol as he was a veteran general and the Hero of the previous war, but didn’t express his concern. In any case, the general didn’t seem bothered by it at that moment.

“I am. A swift execution of the mission and keeping casualties to a minimum are more important than my pride or fame.”

The plain statement from General Puyol made Xavier stand in awe of him once again, but in reality, it was a perspicacious reckoning and agenda on the part of the general.

Queen Aura would be the one to judge the “achievement” of this expedition.

And she dreaded the loss of soldiers more than anything, since the royal army still hadn’t fully recovered from the previous war. For

that reason the achievement would be all for naught when the precious elite unit aka. the Dragonback Archery Knights suffered heavy casualties, no matter how great the victory was.

On the other hand, she would be unable to ignore his achievement when he accomplished the mission with a minimum of casualties, even if he requested the necessary reinforcements and burdened the national treasury accordingly. After all, it had been Queen Aura's orders to keep casualties to a minimum.

She and General Puyol were competing in a political rivalry over the true power in the army, but at the same time, they were both working for the sake of the army of their country.

Queen Aura had to compensate an achievement for the benefit of the country with an adequate reward, no matter what she personally thought about it. That represented the "trustingly" relationship between the Queen and her subject.

(At the best I can figure out how such an abnormally large pack came to be and nip it in the bud, or else come up with a working strategy, so that even an average unit with any commander can defeat a large pack.

At the very least, I'll have to exterminate the Pack Dragons with my personal unit, but that won't really be an exploit anymore.)

"All hands, move along. We'll return to the fortress now and remain on stand-by until I've called for reinforcements from the capital with a small flying dragon."

Without disclosing his inner thoughts, General Puyol gave his orders in a dignified manner.

Chapter 04: The Confined and Revealed Secrets of the Princes

Time passed by and the toughest, also called the hottest season in the Carpa Kingdom finally came to an end.

Around that time, the atmosphere in the Inner Palace was as tense as never before.

“…..”

“…..”

Queen Aura had delayed her morning schedule to stay here and Zenjirou also had resolved himself to not move an inch from here all day, cancelling all his appointments for today. Both of them waited with bathed breaths.

Although the waiting maids of the inner palace had become well acquainted with their masters in the past one and a half year, they simply stood at attention near the wall right now, unable to engage in some casual talk with them, much less fulfil their rightful duties such as serving tea.

The silence was taut as the strings of a bow and continued until the very moment the door was knocked.

“!”

“Enter!”

Aura’s brash prompt lacked any composure, whereupon the person in question entered the living room of the waiting Queen and Prince Consort.

“Pardon me.”

Unaffected by her tone, a man of middle age answered with a calm voice before he came in. His characteristic long hair and beard were streaked with grey flicks of hair and he wore a white robe.

His name was Michelle, the royal physician.

The doctor closed the door of the wide living room behind him and remained standing in front of it without approaching the royal couple on the couch.

His bearing seemed to be agreed on beforehand, seeing as neither Aura nor Zenjirou reprimanded him for it.

Doctor Michelle looked at the fraught Queen and Prince Consort in equal measure, then

“To cut the matter short: Prince Carlos has caught the ‘Spotted Fever‘.”

reported the situation in a manner of fact tone.

As the wet nurse Cassandra was always by his side, she naturally had noticed the change in the crown prince of the Carpa Kingdom, Carlos Zenkichi Carpa, first of all.

It was nothing out of the ordinary that Prince Carlos, still an infant, woke up crying, but the cry on that night had been different.

Cassandra was made for being a wet nurse as she could distinguish whether his demanding cries meant breast-feeding, pee, poop or simply whining.

As soon as she had heard his cry that was shriller, yet weaker than usual, she had woken up the resting waiting maids and sent one to Queen Aura and Doctor Michelle each.

“Spotted Fever”. Since the name of the disease meant nothing to Zenjirou, he checked with Doctor Michelle without relaxing his strained facial muscles.

“Doctor, what does that mean?”

“Well, as the name implies, it is a fever that causes red rashes on the face or body. The rashes are merely outward symptoms that cause neither pain, nor itch, but the prolonged high fever can bring about the throat to swell up.

The fever attack usually lasts around three days. As a rule, a normal grown-up has nothing to fear as long as he stays in bed and eats properly, but it is not unheard of that weaker people like elders or babies lose their life from it."

Taking in the doctor's words, Zenjirou rubbed his cold fingertips against each other as he sat on the couch.

"In other words, Zenkichi's life is at risk?"

"Fortunately Prince Carlos has been kept well nurtured so far and is growing favourable. He is also blessed with a becoming stamina for a baby, so I do not think we need to be that pessimistic.

I dare to say that it is a nine out of ten chance that he will pull through it."

Nine out of ten. That statement inadvertently made Zenjirou heave a sigh of relief, but Aura, sitting next to him, cautioned him with a still tense expression.

"Zenjirou, you have to take his appraisal literally. Put another way, it means that one out of ten babies in the same situation as Carlos would die."

"Oh…"

He was at a loss for words after his wife's indication.

The survival rate was ninety percent. Reversely, that meant a mortality rate of ten percent. One out of ten patients would die. After being told that, it goes without saying that one couldn't be overly optimistic.

There were hardly any parents that could settle back when their own child was put in such a predicament.

Naturally, Zenjirou wasn't one of them either. He wracked his clouded brain with all his might to find a way out of this dilemma.

"Ah! Then we can just use the 'Imbued Stone of Cure'!"

The magic tool could heal any injury or illness in an instant. As he remembered its existence, Zenjioru proposed it eagerly, but the "Queen" reacted opposed.

She bit her lip with a stiff face.

"I do not think so. Our country is in possession of only three of them and it remains unclear when we will actually get our hands on another one.

If I were to use the valuable 'Imbued Stone of Cure' under these circumstances for the sake of a child that will, in their opinion, most likely pull through anyway, I would get in trouble with the nobles."

Quite unusually, Zenjirou got exasperated with the heartless words of his wife.

"What! He's the first prince! Are you saying some stone is more important than our only child!?"

Queen Aura showed a pained expression for a moment as her husband snapped at her for the very first time, but readjusted her mask as the Queen right away and reasoned.

"Carlos is certainly an important figure in our country, but not so important that his passing would immediately affect the country."

"!"

Zenjirou had his breath taken away by the cold words of his wife and before he could come back at her, Doctor Michelle interjected with a calm voice.

"Zenjirou-sama, this may sound a bit relentless, but children in our country catch an illness of this level around four to five times on an average before they reach the age of ten, even amongst royalty and nobility."

"Four to five times…"

The distinct calculation devoid of feeling was convincing enough to

calm his fiery temperament.

The Carpa Kingdom had three ‘Imbued Stones of Cure’ at the present time. On an average however, Prince Carlos would catch an illness like this four or five times during his childhood.

The numbers just didn’t add up.

Even less when considering their plans for more children in the future. If they were to use their trump card for every single illness, there would be a severe shortage of stones. Even Zenjirou himself was gradually brought down to earth by that harsh fact.

“Sorry… I lost my cool.”

As her husband slumped down into the couch, Aura just replied “It’s okay” with a small voice.

In practice, Aura might have used the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ if it weren’t for Zenjirou.

She was definitely the strongest inheritor of the royal blood, but still a woman. There was a limit to how many children she could bear in her lifetime.

All the more because she lived in a world, where childbirth was anything but safe. At the same time, they couldn’t rule out the possibility that her body may no longer be able to conceive after giving birth once.

Having said that, that insufficiency in childbirth was resolved at once when you factored in an “adult male” with strong royal blood such as Zenjirou.

Moreover, he had already proved himself in form of his child Carlos.

To exaggerate it, Prince Carlos was nothing to get excited about in the eyes of the common nobles, so even if he were to die, they would just say: “That’s too bad. Please make an effort for another child, Zenjirou-sama.”

On the other hand, they would surely demand the use of the "Imbued Stone of Cure" if Zenjirou himself were to catch an illness of this nature, since any sophisticated man in this world knew that a prolonged fever came with the possible risk of impaired fertility, even if it did not claim one's life.

As cruel as it may sound, Zenjirou's testicle were currently more important to the country than Prince Carlos' life.

Aura kept silent about it though, because there was no way she could reveal that fact to him.

Meanwhile Zenjirou, too, had calmed down a bit, but that didn't necessarily give him any better ideas.

"What about calling a healer from the Jilbell Family…"

"I am currently the only person, who can use 'Teleport', so I would have to go to the Twin Country all alone with my magic."

"Don't we have a doctor specializing in that 'Spotted Fever'?"

"You are being rude to Doctor Michelle, you know. He is the finest physician in our country. You will not find a better one, no matter the area of expertise."

"And I guess there's no special medicine for it…"

"We would have used it already if there was one."

"Figures…"

"…"

Every elementary idea he could think of was immediately shot down by Aura.

A gloomy silence spread over the room.

Nothing could be done. Well, not quite. If truly nothing could be done, he would be able to give up, but there was an absolute trump card in the form of the "Imbued Stone of Cure", yet the political

situation didn't allow for it to be used.

That was what it meant to be royalty. For the first time, Zenjirou experienced the grave responsibilities of his new standing firsthand.

Quite possibly he could have his way and use the stone, but it would invoke the deep resentment of local nobles and the scorn of foreign royalty if he were to do that.

That would actually be desirable if it only applied to Zenjirou, but it was more than likely that Aura would be caught in the crossfire as well, since she, the Queen, didn't stop him.

Still, she just couldn't stop doubting whether or not she lacked parental love, since she hesitated to do what was best for her own child in need, out of consideration for her political standing.

"We would not have to worry so much if he had at least caught the 'Blessing of the Forest' first. Your Highness, do you know someone that currently has caught the 'Blessing of the Forest'?"

Doctor Michelle broached a slightly different subject as to distract from the inevitable reality and Aura answered his proposition.

"None. No one that would be allowed into the Inner Palace has caught it at the moment."

The "Blessing of the Forest" was a local illness that Zenjirou had caught once before, too.

Its name was meant literally. You only caught it once in your lifetime and it wasn't really deadly unless something dramatically happened. And because it left you with antibodies that worked against various other illness afterwards, it truly was an "almighty preventive".

Of course there were some instances of infants dying from the "Blessing of the Forest", too, but considering the later course of life, it ultimately gave you a better survival rate when you caught it at an early stage.

Due to that, Aura had planned to bring the child of a trustworthy

noble into the Inner Palace if it had caught the “Blessing of the Forest” to let Carlos pick it up, but unfortunately that opportunity didn’t come to be and Carlos caught the “Spotted Fever” first.

“…..”

“…..”

Another oppressive silence filled the room.

She could do no more for her child. Her duties as the Queen forbid her to come in contact with a contagious patient.

Knowing that, Aura heaved a deep sigh, then quickly got up from the couch.

“Very well. Doctor Michelle, I leave Carlos in your and Cassandra’s care. I have to attend a belated meeting now.

I trust in your skills, so do your best.”

“Yes, as you wish.”

The middle-aged doctor, composed from beginning to end, bowed once and Aura shifted her attention from him to her husband, who still sat on the couch and looked up to her.

“What will you do, Zenjirou?”

Confronted like that, Zenjirou pondered for a moment while remaining slumped into the couch.

“…No, today’s no good. I know it won’t change anything when I stay here, but I’m in no state to do any work in the palace, to say nothing of causing irreparable mistakes.”

“I see. Since your work is not all that pressing, that is fine. However, you are not allow to visit Carlos in person, understood?”

“Mm, yeah.”

Aura cautioned him just in case and he obediently obeyed.

Even if he were to pick up the “Spotted Fever”, there was practically no danger for him, since he was a healthy adult with the “Blessing of the Forest”, but he still would end up bedridden for two or three days and above all: he shared a bed with Aura.

The “Spotted Fever” would pass on from Carlos to Zenjirou to Aura.

The royal palace would be paralyzed when the Queen was sick in bed, if only for three days. It was one of the duties of a Ruler to stay healthy.

“It may be no use telling you, but do not take it to heart all too much.”

Saying so, Aura left the Inner Palace with invigorated steps as to show an example of “not taking it to heart all too much”.

* * *

“Ugh… Grr…!”

Left alone in the living room, Zenjirou had immersed himself in practicing magic in order to vent the irritation he felt towards his lack of power.

The exercise involved the “control over magical output”, something he had slowly gotten better at lately. It was an essential skill to master all kind of magic.

If he were able to use “Teleport” by now, he could have gone to the Twin Kingdom to get a healer.

That thought spurred his magic training on.

The likelihood that he would be allowed to summon an expensive healer for an illness with a mortality rate of just ten percent was extremely low, though, even if he could actually use “Teleport”.

“Puuh… Grr…”

The “control over magical output” didn’t really require any physical strength in particular, so it normally didn’t tire you that much, but

Zenjirou hadn't quite got the knack of it, so he was unnecessarily straining his whole body.

Due to that, he had been sweating all over for a while now.

On top of that, he could barely concentrate, because he was always envisioning the pained figure of his sick son, getting practically no results.

"Aw, damnit!"

He cursed on a rare occasion, shook his head so that the sweat was flying around and got up from the couch. Then he headed towards the refrigerator near the wall.

"Puh… I just can't hack it today."

After pouring some boiled water from the silver jug into a glass, he emptied it in one gulp and uttered wailing without meaning to.

But the practice of magic actually called for concentration quite often, so it was a given that training with an absent mind like right now was pointless.

"Aura said not to take it to heart, but that's easier said than done…"

Zenjirou felt utmost respect for his wife, who was as worried as him deep inside, but properly got her act together on the surface to deal with work.

"Would I've been the same if I had married and gotten a child in Japan?"

That rambling monologue slipped out of his mouth when he got back to the couch.

In that case it would have been a fatal weakness for a salaryman.

At the same time, the medical care in modern Japan had a way better credibility than here, so he might have had an easier time trusting the doctor, though.

“Aw, damn. Time for some game.”

All his thoughts were for the wellbeing of his son, no matter what. In order to distract himself a little bit, Zenjirou took out his game console from the TV stand after a long time and the very moment he plugged it in:

“Excuse me, Zenjirou-sama.”

The door was suddenly knocked and the familiar voice of a waiting maid resounded.

“Yes, come in.”

Although reflexively calling her in, he thought to himself.

What did she want? It was too early for lunch. The waiting maids knew that he disliked having others in the same room as him, so they didn’t call out to him unless it was important.

(Don’t tell me something happened to Zenkichi?)

Understandably enough, his train of thought inadvertently took a turn for the worse under the current circumstances.

A middle-aged waiting maid, neatly wearing a crimson maid uniform, entered the room— It was Supervisory Maid Amanda.

Zenjirou’s tension built up. If the Supervisory Maid came over in person, it must be about something very important.

Whether she knew about her master’s tension or not, the middle-aged Supervisory Maid made a perfect textbook curtsy, then started to speak prosaically.

“Zenjirou-sama, we just now received a message from the Royal Palace, or more specifically, from Fabio-sama.

Apparently Prince Francesco from the Twin Kingdom has expressed his desire to pay Prince Carlos a sick bed visit.”

“…Huh?”

Zenjirou leaked a dumbfounded sound as the unexpected development went over his head.

After a moment he finally comprehend what she had said and shook his hand in front of his face, signalising that it was out of the question.

“No, we can’t do that, seriously. Nothing good’s going to come of letting a foreign royalty meet with our sick Zenkichi, for neither side. Besides, I would’ve understood if it had been Princess Bona, but Prince Francesco isn’t allowed inside because of the ban anyway, right?

Or is he saying we’re to have a sick child leave the Inner Palace?”

Talking himself into a fury so far, he suddenly realized:

Secretary Fabio would’ve never allowed that a ridiculous request like that was passed on.

As was expected, Supervisory Maid Amanda brushed his outburst aside and continued to relay the message.

“According to Prince Francesco, he is in the possession of numerous ‘Imbued Stones of Cure’ that were entrusted to him by the Sharrow Family for his trip just in case, and he signified his intention to use one of them for Prince Carlos.”

“!!”

Zenjirou’s reaction was priceless.

“I’ll meet him at once! Get my clothes! I’m going to the Royal Palace!”

“Very well. Please move to the room next door. We have prepared everything there.”

The Supervisory Maid answered her shouting master with a completely composed voice like that.

* * *

After changing in a rush, Zenjirou suppressed his urge to storm down the hallway of the palace as he proceeded at a smart pace. When he entered the room, there already sat Prince Francesco and Queen Aura across each other, talking.

“Oh, Zenjirou.”

“Hello, Your Majesty Zenjirou. Forgive me, but we have already started discussing things here.”

Aura and Prince Francesco stopped their conversation when he entered and called out to him like that.

For a moment, he was surprised to see Aura here, but on second thought, it was only natural that she was present.

Zenjirou himself couldn’t make a decision about the matter of a foreign prince entering the Inner Palace as well as the matter of receiving an “Imbued Stone of Cure” from that very foreign prince.

So it was only natural that Secretary Fabio had notified Aura at the same time as him.

Once he realized that, he uttered a short apology of “Sorry it took so long” while he sat down next to Aura.

The normal etiquette for a meeting between the Queen, the Prince Consort and the foreign prince called for some kind of address of welcome first, even for an highly informal emergency meeting, but neither was Zenjirou in a state of my mind right now to consider that, nor was Prince Francesco the kind of man to nitpick about such trivial common sense.

“I am glad you came, Your Majesty Zenjirou. Sorry for sending for you so suddenly.”

Like always, Prince Francesco showed an innocent smile and didn’t choose his words carefully. The first thing Zenjirou asked him was what weighted on his mind the most.

“Not at all. It concerns me, too, after all. By the way, I don’t see Princess Bona around. Where is she?”

Upon his question, Prince Francesco grimaced a bit as he answered.

“I didn’t tell her. It would become bothersome if I did.”

“Oh, I can see that happening.”

“A valid point for sure.”

Both, Zenjirou and Aura, had to agree with his reasoning.

It practically goes without saying that the earnest Princess Bona wouldn’t allow the handover of the “Imbued Stone of Cure”.

Prince Francesco and Princess Bona were situated in a foreign country, the Carpa Kingdom. The “Imbued Stones of Cure” were their lifeline for when the crunch comes and Prince Francesco lacked common sense to offer one of them like it was nothing while Princess Bona was just a woman of common sense, since she would stop him if she were to get wind of it.

Having said that, Zenjirou and Aura preferred the unreasonable approach from the prince instead, so they were lucky that the reasonable Princess Bona didn’t partake in this.

They looked at each other in the eyes to coordinate their opinions, then:

“In that case, there’s really no need to bring in Princess Bona as well.”

“Indeed. She must be busy, too.”

Princess Bona’s exclusion was decided on the spot.

“Well then, Prince Francesco, you said you would offer us an ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’?”

Although Aura looked calm on the surface, she, too, was restless deep inside, so she got straight to the point.

As a result, Prince Francesco affirmed it readily.

“Yes. I brought one with me. Look here.”

After he answered like that, he pulled a palm-sized, white stone out of his pocket and placed it onto the table.

It looked somewhat like a “cuboid with cropped corners”. The neatly cut white stone with a bit of a marble pattern was probably not worth much by itself.

However, anyone with the ability to discern magical power could see that the palm-sized stone emitted magical power on the level of an average magician.

“You are giving this to us?”

Aura became a bit wary, because Prince Francesco suddenly showcased the item without discussing any compensation for it.

So far, Prince Francesco had continuously behaved so open-handed that you could only consider him an idiot, such as the secret around the glass marbles, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t want a compensation this time by default either.

The prince’s answer, though, was anything but what Aura had expected.

“No. I’m not exactly giving this to you. I’ll ‘personally use it on Prince Carlos’, so I want to ask for your permission to pay him a sick bed visit.”

He didn’t ask for a compensation, but demanded to meet Carlos, since he was going to use the stone himself.

If his answer didn’t come across as strange, she would have a serious lack of prudence, as a Queen and parent alike.

Aura asked more cautious after Prince Francesco’s more than odd request.

“May I ask why? The ’Imbued Stone of Cure’ should be something very important to you as well, so I would like to know why you are offering to use it for Carlos‘ sake.”

“Well, what can I say? I feel kind of ‘congenial’ with Prince Carlos. Besides, as a Prince of the Twin Kingdom, I can get my hands on a ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ easier than others.

So it doesn’t hurt when I use one.”

The phrase “congenial” rang a bell with Zenjirou as he listened to his easy-going remark on the side.

(Mh? I think I’ve heard him say the same before… Oh, right, when we first met at the evening party. He said he felt the same with me, too.)

He felt congenial with both, the father and the son. Could that actually be brushed off as just another of his talkative remarks?

For now Zenjirou decided to consult Aura about it later. In the meantime, the conversation between Prince Francesco and Queen Aura continued.

“Then you are offering this out of pure good-will?”

“Yes. It is my avid desire to free Prince Carlos of his suffering.”

“In that case, there is really no need to specifically use the stone yourself, is there? If you wish to see Carlos, then we can bring him to the Royal Palace later on when he feels better.”

“No, that won’t do. This may sound rude, but the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ is very precious and there’s no guarantee you’ll actually use it, even if the Crown Prince is at stake.”

He put it somewhat blatantly, but his objection was justified.

From a strictly profitable point of view without emotions, it was by no means a bad call to take the “Imbued Stone of Cure”, lie about using it and in fact bet on the “nine out of ten” chance for survival.

Well, they would lose both, the Crown Prince and the trust of the Twin Kingdom, all at once if they unfortunately got the other one out of ten chance, so one wouldn’t usually take that approach.

But as the royalty from a foreign country, Prince Francesco's worry was only natural.

(Well, either way, one thing is certain now. Prince Francesco is definitely not an idiot. His usual behaviour is an act.)

As he was watching the other two from the side, Zenjirou could keep his cool and conclude this.

An idiot would be unable to make such a logical line of argument, not even by accident.

So his usual behaviour had been an act after all. Then why did he go so far as to take off the mask that fooled the majority in his home country, in order to meet Carlos?

"What do you say? I really just want to pay him a simple sick bed visit and promise not to bring anything with me except the 'Imbued Stone of Cure'. No guards either.

You may even examine me throughout first."

Since Aura hesitated, Prince Francesco kept making concessions to no end, but persisted on the sole condition that he visited Carlos in person.

At this point, even Aura noticed that Prince Francesco was hiding some greater agenda.

"Hmm…"

"I beg of you. You have my word that neither the Prince, nor your country will come to harm."

Prince Francesco pleaded by prostrating himself when seated, which looked hilarious, but the plea itself was anything but funny.

Still, if they actually were to let him inside the Inner Palace under these conditions, there definitely was nothing he could perpetrate.

Without weapons and guards, Prince Francesco could easily be seized in the event of attempting any intrigue.

To begin with, he had barely received any military training as one could already tell from his conduct.

Admittedly, he was relatively tall and well-built, but even Aura herself wouldn't have trouble apprehending him if she wanted to.

And above all, Aura was a mother and didn't want to let go off the chance to use an "Imbued Stone of Cure" for her child.

"…Fine. I will assume your sick bed visit to use the 'Imbued Stone of Cure', to be one from a doctor or healer from the Jilbell Family. You will be allowed into the Inner Palace by way of exception.

It would be troublesome when it gets around that we tried to keep a low profile to get you into the Inner Palace, so we might as well make the sick bed visit to use the stone an official event and have you enter openly from the front. Are you fine with that, Prince Francesco?"

"Yes, I am. Thank you very much."

Aura finally conceded, whereat Prince Francesco expressed his gratitude with a bright smile.

* * *

One hour later.

Zenjirou, Aura and Prince Francesco walked down the hallway of the Inner Palace.

Before he was allowed inside, Prince Francesco was subjected to a body search and everything except his clothes and the "Imbued Stone of Cure" was taken away from him. On the other hand, Aura and Zenjirou were quite unusually wearing swords at their waists.

Giving Zenjirou a sword only acted as a deterrent, but Aura could use it like any knight.

All alone, Prince Francesco didn't pose a threat, since he had no combat experience, although he was well-built.

Still, he went to such lengths to get into the Inner Palace and his intention was still unknown, so some worry remained.

At first, they had considered to let Aura's personal guards accompany them into the Inner Palace, but refrained from doing so after weighing up the pros and cons.

It was practically an act of faith that they had allowed the prince into the Inner Palace. Wearing swords themselves was still fine, but if they brought along armed soldiers, who were actually prohibited from entering, it would signalize that they didn't take Prince Francesco at his word.

"Oh, they might be both Inner Palaces, but yours is quite different from ours. That said, I only have vague memories of ours from when I was six, so I can't be too sure, ahaha."

Like a sightseer, Prince Francesco curiously eyed the surroundings as he walked on, showing no sign of tension.

He was playing the fool so much that Zenjirou once again wondered if the prince maybe was just an idiot after all.

Before long the three reached Carlos' bedroom.

"It is I."

She must have notified them beforehand. Upon Aura's call, the door was opened from the inside without any surprise.

"Doctor Michelle and Cassandra are awaiting you inside, Your Highness Aura, Zenjirou-sama and Prince Francesco."

The blonde maid, who had opened the door, said so and lowered her head respectfully. A short while ago, a different waiting maid had been taking care of Carlos, but when Aura had notified them earlier, she had issued a change of shift, too.

The maid with the blonde hair was, along with Secretary Fabio and Royal Archmage Espaldion, a trusted retainer of Aura. She would never let it show, but she was one of the two waiting maids in the Inner Palace that had actual combat experience.

“Good. How is Carlos?”

“He fell asleep just a moment ago. Before that, he was crying the whole time as his throat seemed to hurt.”

“I see…”

Biting her lip, Aura proceeded into the room.

Prince Francesco followed after her and Zenjirou followed after him.

Aura had instructed him not to hesitate in the unlikely event of the prince committing anything suspicious.

In the back of the room stood a small bed, in which their beloved child Carlos Zenkichi was sleeping. To the right and left stood the wet-nurse Cassandra and Doctor Michelle.

“…..”

Cassandra wordlessly bended her plump body into a deep bow. In contrast, Doctor Michelle gave Aura and Zenjirou a sharp glance and said.

“Your Highness Aura, Zenjirou-sama, I have heard the circumstances.

But if you allow me to speak out: You are being overhasty. The ‘Spotted Fever’ is not an illness you will be immune to after catching it once.

And I was of the opinion that you are not to approach the room until I gave the okay.”

Zenjirou inadvertently cowered before the merciless glare of the middle-age physician. The same applied to Aura.

“Sorry, but the situation has changed. Please understand.”

She explained with an apologetic tone.

Any further reprimand must have been contra-productive in his opinion, so Doctor Michelle heaved an affected sigh and interposed waspish.

“So that’s Prince Francesco at the back? You brought an ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ for Prince Carlos?”

An average physician versus a prince from a major power. Under normal circumstances, it would be unforgivable that Doctor Michelle spoke to him first, but right now, he was the physician in charge of Prince Carlos.

So he was given quite a bit of authority in regards to matters involving his patient Carlos.

Maybe the Twin Kingdom had the same custom or maybe he was just being generous?

“Yes, I did. Here it is.”

Either way, Prince Francesco didn’t feel offended by his words and honestly replied like that, showing him the white stone in his right hand.

Seeing the stone glowing with a strong magical power, Doctor Michelle finally softened his expression a bit.

“I see. Prince Carlos’ condition has been stable so far, but if we can heal him immediately, we might as well do it.

And unlike the ‘Blessing of the Forest’, there is no benefit in overcoming the ‘Spotted Fever’ by your own efforts after all.”

Up until now, he hadn’t shown the slightest insecurity while he took care of Carlos, but there was a ten percent chance that the crown prince could die and shouldering that responsibility must have given him a lot of pressure.

The face of the middle-aged physician clearly displayed relief.

In front of the doctor, Prince Francesco kept smiling and took a step closer to the small bed with the sleeping Carlos.

“Okay, I got this. I will relieve Prince Carlos of his illness.”

Saying so, he tapped himself on the chest with his free left hand.

“Well then, Prince Francesco, I do not like to rush you, but can you get started?”

Aura had casually taken up a position from where she could barge in between the bed and the prince at any time and said that.

Prince Francesco nodded once more, then nonchalantly dropped a bombshell.

“Yes, but before that I have to apologize to you.”

“…Apologize?”

Aura obviously readied herself to jump in.

In the back, Zenjirou, too, reached out for the hilt of his sword on reflex.

The blonde waiting maid bended over a little bit in a natural manner, so that she was able to draw the short sword attached to her thigh under the skirt at any moment.

And Doctor Michelle swallowed hard as he watched the scene unfold. The still smiling Prince Francesco continued with a wry look.

“Indeed. The truth is, I have been lying to you.

I claimed to have numerous ‘Imbued Stones of Cure’, because I’m from the Twin Kingdom, but that was a lie.

The Twin Kingdom has the healers of the Jilbell Family and we of the Sharrow Family basically never leave the capital. Therefore a healer can immediately be dispatched when someone from the Sharrow Family falls ill. Accordingly the Royal Family hardly gets any ‘Imbued Stones of Cure’.”

“Then what is that white stone in your hand? It is not the ‘Imbued

Stone of Cure'?"

Aura asked sharply with a stern expression and voice that revealed her bloodlust, whereat Prince Francesco retained his smile and answered brightly.

"Oh no, this is definitely an 'Imbued Stone of Cure'. But it's the one and only in my possession. Bona will be really angry when I use it."

"Now then, what do we do?"

Although Aura crouched down some more and set her hand to the sword at her waist, she signalized Zenjirou, standing at the back, with her eyes not to act hastily.

The behaviour of the prince was clearly dubious, but if he actually meant to harm Carlos, it was even more dubious.

Although he had no claim on the throne, Prince Francesco should be too valuable to send him on a suicidal mission, even if you discounted his only forte of being one of the current best practitioners of the Bestowal Magic.

In other words, it was more than likely that it was not his aim to harm Carlos.

Amidst all that tension, Prince Francesco held up his left hand, not the right hand holding the 'Imbued Stone of Cure', to the bed with the sleeping Carlos

"I will do this instead: 'Relieve this person of the sickness plaguing its body. As compensation, I make two-hundred and eighty-six offerings of magical power to the life spirit.'"

and chanted.

The palm of his left hand emitted a pale light of magical power that showered down on Carlos.

The result was eye-catching. The 'Spotted Fever' was called like that because of its symptom of spot-like red rashes on one's body and face.

Until just a moment ago, Carlos' adorable face, too, had been cluttered pitiable with red rashes.

However, the rashes had completely vanished now. And when you listened closely, you could hear how his rough breathing had changed into a peaceful one.

It was plain as day that the "magic" of the prince had taken effect.

"'Healing Magic'…?"

After a while, Zenjirou finally comprehend what had happened in front of his eyes and muttered softly.

“Impossible!”

On the other hand, Aura just stood there dumbfounded with a surprised expression never seen before.

It was understandable that she was surprised.

Prince Francesco belonged to the Sharrow Royal Family. And yet he had used “Healing Magic”, which was the bloodline magic of the Jilbell Royal Family. According to the common knowledge of this world, this was a practically impossible and insane happening.

“Ehm, could we move elsewhere? I want to explain myself in detail. Ah, but only with the people present at the moment, since I need you to keep quiet about it.”

In the meantime, the perpetrator aka. Prince Francesco was the only one, who kept his carefree attitude, and announced that.

* * *

“Only Doctor Michelle, the wet nurse Cassandra and the waiting maid Margret were with us in the room. For now, I have forbidden the three to leave from there.

I do not mean to scrutinize your magic, but we cannot leave an infant that is still recovering all alone, so they will continue to look after him.

And since I had already forbidden anyone to get near that room when Carlos fell ill, those three will not come in contact with anyone else. That will take care of the secrecy for now.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I appreciate your consideration.”

Since then, Aura, Zenjirou and Prince Francesco had moved to a room, where they could talk in peace.

This room in the Inner Palace was usually used by Zenjirou for his lessons with his private teacher, Lady Octavia.

It was the perfect location, because it was furnished to receive guests without having any stuff from Earth around.

Aura and Prince Francesco were sitting opposite one another with a table in between them and Zenjirou had taken a seat next to his wife. A typical arrangement.

By the means of changing rooms, Aura had regained some of her composure in time.

“Well then, let us hear what you have to say. There is a lot I want to ask, but frankly speaking: Just who are you?”

Unsurprisingly, Aura’s all too frank question made Prince Francesco smile wryly and scratch his head.

“Who I am? I am Francesco, the first son of Crown Prince Joseph from the Sharrow Royal Family, and no one else.”

“Hmm, I guess my question was misleading, so I will ask one thing at a time.

Are you really a member of the Sharrow Family? No, wait, that should go without saying. I see you using your ‘Bestowal Magic’ every day to make us the ‘Future Compensation’ magic tool.

But why do you can use ‘Healing Magic’ then? Is it some kind of trickery?”

She was questioning him a bit too severely, considering he was the prince of a foreign country and the saviour of her sick child.

However, her harsh approach was reasonable, seeing as he did something practically impossible.

Prince Francesco himself seemed to understand that, too, as he showed no signs of being offended and replied obediently.

“It’s no trickery, but genuine ‘Healing Magic’. To be honest, I can use both, ‘Bestowal Magic’ and ‘Healing Magic’.”

He said happy-go-lucky as though he was bragging how impressive that was. Even in all modesty, the word impressive didn’t come close to describing it, though.

As a result, Zenjirou, who had silently listened to the two of them so far, spoke up about something that had been on his mind the whole time.

“Prince Francesco, you told me that you feel congenial with me when we first met at the evening party, right? And today, you said the same about Zenkichi.

I will be plain with you: Does your so-called ‘congenial feeling’ refer to kindred spirits, who ‘inherited two kinds of royal blood’?”

His question surprised Prince Francesco a bit. The prince blinked, then answered with a grin.

“Wow. So you remembered it. Yes, you’re right.

Just like you and Prince Carlos have inherited the blood of the ‘Carpa Royal Family’ and ‘Sharrow Royal Family’, I have inherited the blood of the ‘Sharrow Royal Family’ and ‘Jilbell Royal Family’.”

“…..”

“…..”

Zenjirou and Aura were speechless for a while when Prince Francesco readily confirmed the greatest secret of the century.

Still, one mystery was solved like that.

The accepted theory amongst scholars researching magic, was that it was possible that someone could use two bloodline magic when the person had inherited two royal bloodlines and had more magical power than the average royalty.

Prince Francesco had nearly twice as much magical power as Zenjirou and when he had inherited not just the blood of the “Sharrow Royal Family”, but also the blood of the “Jilbell Royal Family” with that kind of magical power, it was explainable that he could use two bloodline magic.

“Then your parents are…”

Zenjirou had trouble asking as it concerned the dishonour of his parents, but Prince Francesco's answer was beyond his expectation.

"No, you've got that wrong. My parents are without doubt the Crown Prince Joseph and his wife Tosca."

"Eh? But…"

The prince gave the confused Zenjirou a wry smile and explained.

"Your Majesty Zenjirou, the Twin Kingdom has been established by two royal families hundred of years ago. Do you honestly believe that the two bloodlines never immingled during all this time?"

Although Zenjirou was asked that question, it was the listening Aura, who answered it.

"I see. In a way, you are the same as Princess Bona then."

"Yes, indeed."

Although she was born into an average family of lower ranked nobles, Bona had atavistically awakened to the bloodline magic of the Sharrow Family. On the other hand, Prince Francesco was born as a direct descendant of the Sharrow Family and atavistically awoke to the bloodline of the Jilbell Family. Therefore one could certainly put them on the same level.

"Then that is also the real reason that you do not have a claim on the throne, even though you are the son of the Crown Prince?"

When Aura asked with narrowed eyes, Prince Francesco didn't stop smiling, but his smile certainly became a bit clouded with tension as he affirmed it.

"Yes. It's a secret treaty between our two royal families.

When someone in one family awakens to the bloodline magic of the other, that person has to spend to the rest of his life alone to bring his lineage to an end."

That treaty was most likely arranged to preserve the claim on their

respective bloodline magic. Without such a treaty, it would be incredible difficult to run a unique country with two royalties.

Still, no matter how much you sugar-coated it, it must have gotten across extremely unfair to Prince Francesco?

Maybe he was hiding the distress over it behind that innocent smile of his? While pondering over that, Aura inquired further.

“Then your usual behaviour is an act because of that? An act to convince others that you have no claim on the throne, because you cannot make the real reason public.”

By playing a lazy failure, he sacrificed himself for the good of his country. Maybe he felt “congenial” with Zenjirou in that regard as well?

That thought had crossed her mind, but surprisingly enough, Prince Francesco shook his head and denied her assertion.

“No, if anything, that’s actually my true self. I was never smart to begin with and always speak before thinking it through.

Usually I just say and do whatever I want without holding back. Only at times like this I pull myself together and act like I’ve been taught.”

“I see.”

His statement made Aura smile wryly.

He probably didn’t notice the fact that he was no longer an idiot when he could “pull himself together and act like he had been taught”. It would be difficult for an onlooker to overthrow the self-assessment he had ever since he was a child, with just words.

Anyway, it now made sense how his usual “foolish act” come across so naturally.

That left only one last question. And the most important, at that.

Truth be told, Aura had already guessed his answer to the question

by now, but she had to pose it anyway.

Sitting straight on her chair, Aura took a deep breath and spoke well though out in a calm tone.

“Okay, one last question, Prince Francesco.

Why did you confide your secret to us? And why did you go out of your way to prove that you can actually use ‘Healing Magic’ by getting into the palace with a lie and healing my child? I am pretty sure it is a secret amongst secrets that not many in the Twin Kingdom even know of.”

Prince Francesco straightened his back like Aura.

And then he showed a somewhat transparent smile that was so unlike his previous innocent smile.

“Yes. The only ones that actually know about it are the king, the pope, my parents and my teacher for Healing Magic. Ah, Bona doesn’t have a clue, of course, so please keep it that way.

As for my reason: I wanted to let you know that someone can really use both bloodline magic when he has inherited the blood from two royal families and has a lot of magical power like myself.”

“…..”

The answer really was as expected, so Aura closed her eyes and kept silent for a moment.

“In other words…!”

Next to her, Zenjirou must have come to the same conclusion as her, if only a bit later. He couldn’t hide his surprise and opened his eyes wide.

Queen Aura resolutely nodded to her husband, then said with a calm voice.

“Indeed. Our child Carlos can use two bloodline magic, the ‘Space-Time Magic’ as well as ‘Bestowal Magic’. Am I right, Prince

Francesco?”

Carlos had a magical power on par with Prince Francesco. That conclusion was inevitable when the earlier explanation from the prince could be trusted.

“Yes.”

The affirmation from Prince Francesco echoed rather intensely in Zenjirou’s ears.

Chapter 05: The Intention Falls Into Place

Following this, Prince Francesco immediately left the Inner Palace.

On the other hand, Aura and Zenjirou, both still speechless, headed straight to the room of their child.

Their aim was unfortunately not to embrace their healed child, but to bound the confined physician, wet nurse and waiting maid to secrecy once more.

“Listen, under no circumstances are you allowed to speak of anything that happened in this room today. If it does come to light by chance, remember that not only you, but your whole family will pay with their lives for it. Understood?”

“Of course.”

The doctor, the wet nurse and the waiting maid answered and bowed in unison to the unvarnished warning from Queen Aura.

“Good. Keep it in mind.”

Aura nodded contented.

This should probably take care of it.

In his capacity as the royal physician, Doctor Michelle was used to secrecy and the wet nurse Cassandra was a trustworthy woman with a profound loyalty to the royal family.

As for the blonde waiting maid… There was no need to especially point it out to Margret.

She was a trusted retainer of Aura.

If she couldn’t be trusted to keep a secret, then surely no one under Aura’s command could be trusted.

Considering all that, Aura had concluded that the secret would be safe unless something drastic happened.

“Fuh…”

“Even I am all exhausted today.”

Having moved from Carlos’ room to the living room, Zenjirou and Aura threw themselves onto the couches and slumped into it like a wet sack without saying anything for a while.

“…..”

“…..”

All too much had happened for one day today.

Carlos had fallen ill.

Prince Francesco had paid him a sick bed visit.

Then he had confined them his secret and revealed the secret of Carlos.

Each and every one was already a shocking matter on its own.

The sunlight, coming in from the windows, was still illuminating the room brightly, but Aura and Zenjirou had no longer the energy to even turn their heads.

Zenjirou had already cancelled all his work in the morning, but Aura was supposed to finish some more work today. Nevertheless, she had decided to call it a day at this point for once.

She knew very well that she eventually would be overwhelmed from too much work if she kept pressing on at such a time.

Besides, abandoning her work in the royal palace didn’t equal having free time from now on.

“…Kuh.”

They lazed around for a while. When Aura recovered somewhat of

her strength, she sat up straight on the couch.

“Do you need more rest, Zenjirou?”

“Uhh… Mmh? You want to get started already?”

Called upon, Zenjirou just turned his head towards his across-sitting wife without getting up.

“Yes, if it is alright with you, I would like to begin.”

“Mm… Okay.”

Answering like that with sleepy, half-closed eyes, he, too, sat up straight.

“Now then, where do we start?”

Not yet back in top shape, Aura sloppily crossed her legs on top of the couch, whereas Zenjirou replied with interjectional yawns while craning his neck.

“Mh? Can I ask then what I found strange first?”

“Sure, go ahead. I do not know whether I will be able to answer it, though.”

OK’d by her, Zenjirou spoke up hesitantly as he was collecting his thoughts.

“Then a fundamental question first. Or rather, a review. It really was ‘Healing Magic’ that Prince Francesco used to heal Zenkichi, right? And not that he secretly used the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ in his right hand instead.”

“Yes, no doubt. You must have seen it, too. The magical power back then really came from Prince Francesco’s body and showered down on Carlos. That was his magic beyond question.

And as you can see, the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ is not consumed.”

Saying so, Aura placed the white stone redundant with magical

power on the table.

Zenjirou blinked surprised.

“Huh? He left it with us?

“Yes, because the official reason for paying Carlos a sick bed visit all the way in the Inner Palace was to use the stone. It would contradict itself if he were to leave with an unused stone.”

“But didn’t he say that Princess Bona would be angry if he used it?”

“According to him it is an everyday occurrence for both of them that she gets angry at him.”

“Oh no… That sounds like Prince Francesco has a hard time, but when you think about it, it’s Princess Bona, who has a hard time.”

Zenjirou apologized to Princess Bona in his mind.

“Anyhow, the prince wasn’t an idiot after all. Then the story that the king himself appointed Princess Bona as his chaperon…”

“She was undoubtedly used for obfuscation. Prince Francesco’s foolish acting becomes so more believable when someone is actually taking him serious.”

“How pitiful…”

Tears welled in his eyes.

Seriously pitying Princess Bona now, Zenjirou moved on to the next topic in order to shake off that feeling.

“Anyway, I kind of understand the explanation that Zenkichi can use ‘Space-Time Magic’ as well as ‘Bestowal Magic’, but why did Prince Francesco go to such length to prove that to us? In my opinion, that was only beneficial to us.”

Aura shook her head to his question with a slightly bitter expression.

“No. In the short run, knowing that actually holds no merit for us.

Think about it. Do you actually believe it is possible to learn the correct intonation, magical power input and perception for the ‘Bestowal Magic’ without a teacher?”

“Oh, right. Just knowing the fact that you can use it doesn’t mean you can actually use it. You need to learn the right way to use it.”

Zenjirou was convinced, whereas Aura nodded displeased.

“Exactly. Without the help of the Sharrow Royal Family, it would probably take three or more generations to learn it by trial and error.”

“Uwah, that’s long…”

Now it made sense that Aura said there was no merit in the short run.

“So, in other words, Prince Francesco’s going to ask for something in exchange for teaching Zenkichi any time soon?”

After a bit of pondering, Zenjirou made a conjecture about the ulterior motive of the foreign prince, which Aura affirmed, albeit correcting it a bit.

“That is more than likely. Still, it is hard to believe that Prince Francesco is acting on his own on this. The revealed information is just too grave for that.

If the Crown Prince or the King of the Sharrow Family are pulling the strings here, they might be after something entirely different.”

“Something entirely different?”

Since Zenjirou inclined his head puzzled, Aura continued to explain with a slightly stern expression.

“Yes. There is no real benefit for the Sharrow Family when Carlos can use ‘Bestowal Magic’. But who do you think will profit when it becomes publicly known that Carlos is a practitioner of the

‘Bestowal Magic’?”

“Prince Francesco?”

“Indeed. Leaving his political standing aside, he has an incredible talent.

It is only natural to want to pass his immense amount of magical power on to the next generation, not to mention his special feature of having two magic.”

“Right. The amount of magical power’s generally inherited from the parents after all, with a few exceptions.”

The inherited factor was only as noticeable as one from a phenotypic trait from the parent, though, but having more magical power was appealing to royalty, who were using “Bloodline Magic”.

Yet Prince Francesco, in possession of tremendous magical power, was forbidden to make children by reason of their secret agreement. From a certain point of view that was certainly a waste.

“In short, they are planning to overrule the agreement, where the ‘lineage of those with two bloodline magic has to end’, by establishing a public precedence in form of Zenkichi?”

“Well, yes, but that is just my personal deduction. The Twin Kingdom would practically bring about a revolution if they actually were to do that, so I doubt that they will go so far.”

“I see. Then it won’t become such a big fuss?”

His somewhat hopeful remark was merciless dismissed by the Queen.

“No. I am afraid that it will. Now that foreigners know how Carlos can use ‘Bestowal Magic’, it is more than likely that our own people will get to know about it, too.

And when that happens, the next question will be: ‘How did Prince Carlos get the disposition for the Bestowal Magic?’

Then it will only be a matter of time until it is exposed that you, Zenjirou, have inherited the blood of the Sharrow Royal Family. And at long last, the radical faction, starting with General Puyol, will surely insist even more forcefully than before that you take a concubine."

"Oh god…"

After she had indifferently talked about the presumptive future so far, the Queen showed a cramped expression that suppressed her pain when her husband leaked a despairing outcry.

"Sorry. In the end, I am always breaking my promises to you, even though you have never broken any to me…"

Since his wife slouched her shoulders so much so that you could practically see her dejection, Zenjirou reflexively answered with comforting words.

"Nah, don't worry about it so much. You didn't break your promise to me, the circumstances of my ancestors are just a little bit too special."

In fact, it really wasn't Aura's fault. If anything, her only mistake was that she had been too naive about the initial future prospect.

Things were just developing into an unpleasant direction for him, but as the Queen, Aura had no choice but to burden him with it, since the country would suffer too much otherwise.

"Nonetheless, I have given you the condition that 'you do not need to do anything except making a child' when I summoned you. I wish I could travel back in time with 'Time Reversal' and slap myself in the face.

To be perfectly honest with you, the Royal Palace would sink into total chaos right now, if I really were to have you 'do nothing'."

Aura vomited out these words just like mocking herself for her naivety back then.

"Hmm, but I never really thought that I would get to do nothing.

And I did have my share of free time for a few month after the wedding.

But not having to do anything wasn't as fun as I thought it would be. So it's all right in the end, I guess."

He certainly had chosen his words in order to comfort Aura, but they weren't a lie either.

For the better or worse, he had gotten used to the pressure that he felt when he acted as a representative for the country, so he no longer felt all that mentally tired.

He had nothing serious to complain about in his current lifestyle.

But especially because of that he absolutely wanted to refuse a "concubine", who would turn this life upside down.

Of course he would need to find his inner peace with it when, in the worst case, he could no longer avoid it, but he once again vowed to himself that he would at least "not take a concubine" until the time he ran out of options.

"But is there nothing you want to have or do?"

Zenjirou was already used to his wife's question as she asked it for the nth time, and mused for a moment, then gave a slightly different answer than usually.

"Hmm, let's see… Doesn't have to be right away, but I want to hold Zenkichi."

His response was completely different from what Aura had expected, but it was undoubtedly his greatest wish right now.

After all, he had been unable to visit him in the past few days due to work, and today had been the ruckus with the "Spotted Fever".

His beloved son was supposed to be healed, but he wanted to hold him with his own hands and feel his warmth in order to erase all doubts within him as soon as possible.

“Zenjirou…”

Even Aura could only make a wry smile in response.

She had asked him the question, because she had wanted to reward him in some way or other for not voicing a single complain when she had put him through so much trouble, but she suddenly emphasized with his reply.

“You are right. His illness is already cured, so Doctor Michelle surely will not fuss anymore. Let us go pay him a visit in the near future.”

“Yeah, let’s. Good, the mere thought of it gives me back my power!”

Just as he had said, his eyes were bursting with strength again as he leaned forward on the couch and rolled his shoulders.

“However, you are not allowed to speak in front of Carlos.”

“Oh, come on! I’ve been studying like crazy lately. My pronunciation has gotten better, too, so I wish you would let me say something else than ‘it’s me, papa’ now.”

“Nope. Your effort is laudable, but not so much the outcome.”

“Harsh words…”

“Fufu, the future of our child is at stake after all.”

The following chit-chat continued happily, replacing the gloomy atmosphere from before.

* * *

“Prince Francesco, you are being too careless! I cannot believe you demanded to be allowed into the Inner Palace. One wrong step and it would have caused a huge scandal!”

At the same time, Prince Francesco, now back in the south building of the Royal Palace, received a really long lecture from the angry “chaperon” woman, like he had expected.

With the hottest season of the year out of the way, the room should have a rather pleasant temperature, since it was cooled by a magic tool called “Fog Genesis”, but Princess Bona’s flushed face was drenched in sweat while she was raising her voice.

Unlike Prince Francesco, who sat cosily on the couch, she had been standing most of the time with her arms pressed onto the table, leaning forward aggressively.

“My bad. But don’t you feel sorry for Prince Carlos? He isn’t even two years old yet and had an illness that might have killed him.”

When a royalty, whether from the Sharrow or Jilbell Family, got sick in the Twin Kingdom, the healers from the Jilbell Family immediately used their “Healing Magic”. Due to that, the members of the royal families in the Twin Kingdom were not used to dying from an illness.

In this way the “excuse” from Prince Francesco had had cogency, but not enough to convince the diligent Princess Bona.

“I do feel sympathy for Prince Carlos. However, I have been told that the ‘Spotted Fever’ is not such a lethal illness. Yet you used the one and only ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ you possess!

What are you going to do when you yourself catch an illness now! We are not in the Twin Kingdom here. There are no healers around!”

She made a “sound argument” as she talked herself into a fury, but to anyone, who knew that the pressed prince was actually a healer himself, it only looked like she was making a fool out of herself.

Having said that, there was a possibility that he would be unable to use “Healing Magic“, because he lacked the concentration when his illness suddenly worsened or he suffered an unavoidable wound. Likewise might he be unable to pronounce the incantation properly when he got a hoarse voice in the worst case. Consider that, it really had been careless to give away his one and only “Imbued Stone of Cure”.

“Don’t worry. I already informed my father in the capital with the ‘Burning Pair Parchment’. He’ll send over a replacement at once.”

“Y- You even used the ‘Burning Pair Parchment’!?”

Princess Bona nearly fainted when she heard his answer.

The ‘Burning Pair Parchment’ was a magic tool.

It had originally been created with the military intentions to lit a fire in far away places, because one parchment from the bestowed pair of dragonskin parchments burnt exactly the same way as the other when you lit up one. But as soon as they discovered that they could write on it by means of burn marks, it was immediately established as a way of communication.

It hardly needs mentioning that its rate of transmission and secrecy was outstanding, considering that the fastest means of communication in this world was usually the “Small Flying Dragon”.

To cite an example: One country could use limited “emails” while the others were still using carrier pigeons or mounted couriers. Its value of benefit was extremely high. So high that it was said that its designer was the hidden mastermind behind the rise of the Twin Kingdom as the supreme ruler of the central region of the South Continent.

On a related note, magic tools such as the “Sand Pair Box”, which tried to generate the same effect with Earth Magic instead, or the “Water Pair Parchment”, which used water instead of ink, were developed, too, but never found practical application.

As a general rule, the “Burning Pair Parchment” was so valuable that it was only given to commanders of a fortress near the country border or diplomats in foreign countries for genuine emergencies.

Yet Prince Francesco had used his so readily, so Princess Bona was at a loss for words about his carefreeness.

Was it due to the fact that he was a prince of gentle birth?

That thought crossed her mind for a moment as she was well aware that she had a parsimonious spirit.

“Yep. My father and grandfather told me to inform them at once if I use the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’. Oh, I asked them to send other stuff we are lacking, too. They will bring a support and fixture for your engraving, too. The other day you said you couldn’t find a good fixture here, right?”

“Really? Thank you very much! That has been troubling me. I know I should not be saying this, but the engraving techniques in this country leave a lot to be desired, and the same goes for their tools.”

“Yeah, I know. Kind of loose, aren’t they?”

“You noticed it as well? That is indeed the case. How do I put it? It does not properly fixate the metal and every time you apply the graver, it slips slightly out of position. The craftsmen here do not seem to mind it, though, so I cannot bring myself to mention it… Wait a moment, we are getting off-topic!”

Loosing herself in the talk about jewellery, Princess Bona suddenly noticed that she was led astray. She withstood the temptation and got back to the original topic.

“Let’s say I acknowledge your fellow feeling for Prince Carlos. Could you not have handed the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ to Her Majesty Aura or His Majesty Zenjirou?

Why were you being so reckless and entered the Inner Palace yourself?”

“The Carpa Kingdom has its own stock of ‘Imbued Stones of Cure’, you know? But they didn’t use one this time. So I couldn’t be sure whether Her Majesty Aura would use mine, even when I handed her it.”

That was definitely a sound argument from him, but Princess Bona got a bad feeling when she heard his justification.

“Uhm… Prince Francesco? I do not think it is possible, but I would like to ask just in case: You did not say something similar to Her

Majesty Aura, correct…?”

“Similar? I practically told her that word by word.”

“…..”

She put both hands on the table and hung her head so much it seemed it would fall off.

“Don’t worry. Her Majesty prefers a direct approach and is frank with you about small matters.”

Prince Francesco laughed it off unconcerned and appeased her by shaking his hand in denial, but Princess Bona didn’t hear anything of it.

“I- I personally have to apologize to Her Majesty Aura… No, she must be rather busy, so I should discuss it with His Majesty Zenjirou first…”

The fact that she, despite the circumstances, mumbled a constructive plan to fix the situation to herself, instead of harbouring a grudge, proved how genuine her diligence and sense of responsibility were, even if she was still hanging her head.

After behaving like that for a short while, she raised her head, as she had seemingly made a resolve, and spoke.

“Prince Francesco, I have something urgent to attend to now, so you will have to excuse me. And for the love of God, please stay put.

Do you understand? If you have to go out, you absolutely have to tell me, okay? I do not need any weird consideration.

Well then, I will see you later.”

Once she had rattled away, she quickly left the room.

Her exit was signalized by the quiet clattering of the closing door.

As if on cue, Prince Francesco then changed his already slovenly

posture for the worse and laid down on the couch.

“Puh…”

Apparently the previous casual attitude had been his attempt to check himself in due consideration of Princess Bona.

He yawned shamelessly, then folded his arms behind his head and looked up to the ceiling while showing the usual smile on his face.

“Man, Bona sure is cute. Somehow I’m getting healed just by looking at her.”

In fact, he had never met a woman before that tired him as little as Princess Bona did.

“Maybe I would have a wife like her by now, if it weren’t for the way I am?”

Stretching his hands out towards the ceiling, he stared at the magical power emitting from these hands.

Even amongst royalty, his magical power was exceptional and it was more than twice as large as Princess Bona’s or Zenjirou’s.

Due to that, his body had control over the bloodline magic of two royalties without suppressing one. The fact that he could use two bloodline magic didn’t mean that he had two kind of magical powers, but just for fun, he was using his right hand for the “Bestowal Magic” and his left for the “Healing Magic”.

Prince Francesco continued his monologue while the magic power flickered irregularly on each hand.

“It’s a bit of a shame that I can’t get married, but I still like my carefree position. Or at least I don’t really want to be part of the political world with a claim on the throne.”

His face showed a bitter smile he would never show to anyone when he honestly gave voice to his thoughts.

“I wish my father or grandfather would think more like me…”

Still laying on the couch, he wordlessly stared at the ceiling for a while.

“The ‘Uniting Faction’…”

Before long, an unfamiliar term left his mouth quietly muttered.

“Uniting Faction”. Simply put, it was a political group that deemed the current dual system of the Twin Kingdom with the Sharrow and Jilbell Families ruling one country as “unstable”, and aimed at uniting both families.

And although it was called the “Uniting Faction” altogether, there were actually rivalling subgroups. Some wanted the Sharrow Family to be the only Royal Family and have the Jilbell Family take a backseat. Others in turn wanted the exact opposite of that. And yet others suggested that both families appointed a common king on a rotating basis.

One minority group amongst that “Uniting Faction” was called the “Absolute Uniting Faction”.

Like the name implied, they propagated the policy to literally “unite” both royal families in the future by the means of mandatory marriages between the Sharrow and Jilbell Family.

In their opinion, the king ought to be someone, who can use both bloodline magic, to serve as a symbol for the united royal family.

Having said this, it was nothing but a pipe dream, an extreme ideal so to speak, because there had never been such a person in the “past”. But “right now”, there lived an ideal candidate in the shadows.

“It’s not like I can’t relate to their ideal, but I wish they would keep me out of it.”

Their ideal intended to destroy the long-standing history of the two royal families, who went hand in hand with each other on the surface, but competed with each other over their authority in secret.

In simplified terms: It only sounded like they wanted to cause turmoil in peaceful times.

A truly troublesome issue.

For that reason, Prince Francesco stopped thinking any further.

“Well, come what may.”

Saying so, he sat up with a jerk and his face showed his usual innocent smile again.

* * *

A few days later.

Four royalties of two countries were meeting in a room of the Royal Palace.

Queen Aura and Prince Consort Zenjirou represented the Carpa Kingdom, whereas Prince Francesco and Princess Bona represented the Twin Kingdom of Sharrow and Jilbell.

It meant that all the royalties that were currently situated in the Carpa Kingdom were assembled in one spot.

The official pronouncement entailed an apology for the forceful entrance of Prince Francesco into the Inner Palace and an expression of thanks for his treatment, respectively. That wasn’t the real agenda, though.

And as a matter of fact, the pretext had quickly ended with Princess Bona saying “My apologies for causing you troubles the other day”, to which Aura had answered “No, not at all. I cannot thank you enough for using the ‘Imbued Stone of Cure’ for my son. I will definitely repay you for it.”

To begin with, the diligent Princess Bona had more or less worked out a conciliation for the incident beforehand through correspondence and Aura had no intention to aggravate the situation, since she knew about the secret circumstances regarding Prince Francesco.

Therefore their meeting immediately advanced to the next objective.

“Are we done now? We are, right? Good, then onto my business next.

This is the finished ‘Future Compensation’ magic tool. Thank you very much for your cooperation, Your Majesty Aura.”

Saying that, Prince Francesco took a small gold work out of his pocket and placed it onto the table.

“Oh, wonderful.”

“Wow, amazing.”

Aura and Zenjirou involuntarily leaned over the table and eyed the small magic tool. Zenjirou naturally saw it for the first time, since he hadn’t been involved at all, but even Aura saw the finished product for the first time now, even if she had helped bestow the magical power numerous times before.

It was barely big enough to balance it on two fingers. To describe it more detailed: A light blue marble, provided by Zenjirou, was only enclosed by a metal frame in form of a regular octahedron.

The frame was most likely made out of pure gold, since it sparkled brightly.

The design was simple, but well done. At least to Zenjirou it looked like the thickness of the frame was coherent. And all eight holes, showing the marble inside, appeared to be regular triangles of the same size, too.

The handiwork was so perfect, precisely because of its simple design.

The admiration from Queen Aura and Zenjirou made the satisfied Prince Francesco figuratively give himself a pat on the back while he carried out his exposition of the ornament.

“Only the transparent jewel from His Majesty Zenjirou on the inside

functions as the magic tool. The outside frame is merely a cover for it.

Spherical magic tools will lose their functionality from the slightest crack, so it was designed with a sturdy framework.

But it is still breakable, so please be careful with it."

"Yes, I understand."

After listening seriously to his explanation, Aura nodded short and reached out her hand for the magic tool.

"Oh, so small."

"Certainly, but it still fulfils almost all of your conditions.

Magic tools are generally classified into three types: 'Disposable', 'Self-charging' and 'Manual Charging', so if anything, this one is a ´"Manual Charging' type.

In order to use it, you have to directly touch the jewel on the inside with your finger and then chant 'I offer the magic of XX days' in the magic language. By doing so, the jewel will store the effect of 'Future Compensation'.

And like you have requested, it also is possible to 'Replenish' it. So when you apply a day worth of magical power today and again after a week or so, you will have two days worth of magical power at your disposal.

On the other hand, if you wish to access the magical power stored through 'Future Compensation', you likewise touch the jewel directly with your finger and say 'I invoke you' in the magic language. You control the magic tool with these two commands.

I am afraid, though, that it was not possible to make it 'release only a part of the magical power' like you had requested. So when you chant 'I invoke you', it will release its whole pool of stored magical power, whether it is worth just one day or a whole year, so please keep that in mind."

Maybe he only became serious when he explained about magic tools? Prince Francesco kept a composed expression and a distinct tone so unlike his usual way of talking, for his explanation.

“Impressive. Seeing such a potent magic tool with such a perfect shape confirms all the rumours about you being a first-rate ‘craftsman’ and ‘practitioner of Bestowal Magic’.”

Zenjirou showered him in praise with a polite tone, whereas Prince Francesco

“Please! You’re putting me on the spot. But it was worth working so hard.”

showed his familiar innocent smile and scratched his head bashful.

“Yes, it is a wonderful piece. Let me thank you once again, Prince Francesco.”

And although Aura showed an indifferent expression and spoke with a flat voice, she admired the power of the magic tool in front of her at heart even now.

The significance of this magic tool was enormous.

It might give overly expensive magic like “Time Reversal” or “Space Isolation Barrier” a practical application now.

Its only shortcoming was that the stored magical power couldn’t be used bit by bit. If it were able to do that, she could have used “Teleport”, the best and most frequently used magic amongst the Space-Time Magic, in all conscience, but life wasn’t always a bowl of cherries.

(But it will practically the same if we can make more ‘Future Compensation’ magic tools in the future.)

Needless to say, the practitioners of Bestowal Magic from the Twin Kingdom would hardly agree to a “mass production” of magic tools for the Carpa Kingdom.

In that case, her plan necessarily involved either teaching Carlos the

Bestowal Magic or having Zenjirou make a bastard that could use Bestowal Magic.

The blood from the Carpa Family would be too dominant in a child from Aura, so it was pretty unlikely that it would awaken to the Bestowal Magic.

It would be so much easier if all her children were blessed with enough magical power to use both magic without problem, like Carlos, but expecting another direct descendant being born with such enormous magical power was seeing things through rose-coloured glasses.

As a matter of fact, Aura only knew of one more person that had a magical power on par with Carlos, namely the blonde prince in front of her.

Moreover, when you excluded these two, she was, as far as she knew, already regarded as someone with quite a lot of magical power, even though she only had seventy to eighty percent of their magical power.

Considering all that, it was rather foolish to expect her next children to have equal or greater magical power than Carlos.

She should try to mass produce the marbles in the future by advancing the development of the glass manufacture.

At the same time, she should raise practitioners of “Bestowal Magic” and “Space-Time Magic” by letting Zenjirou take a couple of concubines to make as much bastards as possible to a feasible extent.

That decision was supposed to be executed without hesitation, if she were only thinking about advancing the influence of her country.

It hardly needed mentioning that it wasn’t that simple. Various factors needed to be considered, such as diplomatic issues with the Twin Kingdom for practically stealing their bloodline magic or authority claims from other families when Zenjirou took a

concubine.

(Still, I better put up with the fact that my husband will no longer be able to avoid taking a concubine at this point.)

In the moment Aura drew a conclusion that caused a sharp pain to run through her chest,

“Excuse me, Your Highness. It is nearly time. Are you ready?”

the door was knocked and a familiar middle-aged man with a slender face entered: Secretary Fabio.

Unlike the other three, Aura was overwhelmed with duties, so she had coordinated it with them from the beginning that she would leave the meeting ahead of time.

“Already this late? Fine. Prince Francesco, Princess Bona, I will excuse myself now.

Take care of the rest, Zenjirou.”

Saying so, Aura stood up from her chair, whereat Zenjirou also stood up.

“It has been a pleasure, Your Majesty Aura.”

“Thank you for allocating some time for us out of your busy schedule, Your Majesty Aura.”

Prince Francesco curtly said his thanks with a smile while Princess Bona bowed faithfully like always.

“Yes, I will, Your Highness.”

Seen off by the respectful words of her husband, which she would never hear in the Inner Palace, Aura left the room.

* * *

Letting Zenjirou take care of the rest and leaving early, Aura then headed to the room she was most familiar with in the Royal Palace:

The office of the Queen.

“Fuh…”

After she had sat down in her usual chair, a gloomy sigh left her mouth reflexively.

This emotional manifestation of the Queen didn’t escape the Head Secretary.

“Is something the matter, Your Highness? For you to sigh unbefitting like that…”

She hadn’t heard his unblemished way of speaking in a long time, since she had assigned him to Zenjirou lately, so she felt more nostalgic than angry.

“Oh, well, it turns out that I will have to burden my husband once again. So, to be honest, I am feeling a bit depressed.”

Aura craned her neck with these words and sat back, looking up to the ceiling.

Her secretary, known for his usual indifferent mask, perked his eyebrows up in reaction to her whining, and said in a teasing tone.

“Oh dear, enamoured, aren’t we? I reckon, you are that afraid of making him angry?”

Aura narrowed her eyes displeased from his obviously ridiculing words, and spit out her answer.

“Yes, I am. More than anything at the moment, to be honest. Maybe you do not realize how scary it is to anger my husband?”

“Who knows? People say that rational people like him are beyond control once their emotions gain the upper hand, though.”

On a rare occasion, Secretary Fabio avoided a straight answer. Feeling a bit advantageous, Aura denied him.

“No, no. It is nothing that simple.

Listen, I will give you an example.

Suppose that I angered Manuel Márguez. In that case it does not matter whether I or him are in the right. It will still affect the state affairs terribly when Count Márguez is in a bad mood. What would you do in my position to lift his mood?"

Secretary Fabio couldn't quite wrap his head around it, but answered the rather realistic example right away, even if he cocked his head.

"Lift his mood, you say? Let me see, assuming it has to be resolved quickly at all costs, I believe the fastest method would be to temporarily exempt him from the taxes to the royal family. Because, for the better or worse, Count Márguez reaches his decisions based on profit."

Aura nodded once, as his reply satisfied her, and cited another example.

"Well then, what would you do for Puyol Guillén under the same prerequisites? Unless you fix the relationship with General Puyol as fast as possible, the country will suffer. How would you act in that case?"

"I would have no other choice, but to promote him to 'Marshall'. He is an ambitious man, but his ambition is directed at his military standing rather than nobility."

That reply was apparently satisfying as well. A grinning Aura asked him a last question.

"Well, certainly. And now the last, important question.

The situation is the same as before. How would you improve the mood of my husband if you had to fix the relationship as quickly as possible?"

"….."

Secretary Fabio remained silent for a while.

“…..”

But no matter how hard he pondered, he apparently couldn’t find an answer to that question.

“I give up. I cannot think of anything.”

Shrugging his slender shoulders, he admitted defeat.

The grin on Aura’s face intensified.

“See. You have no clue, right? You cannot think of anything, right? Same goes for me. Now you should know why I am so scared to make my husband angry.

There is no trump card you can play to at least get him to hear you out when the relationship got worse by angering him.”

“Indeed. I have never met a person, who is so not attached to anything in particular, before.”

He had no choice but to acknowledge that.

Zenjirou wasn’t after money, nor did he show any ambition towards status. Neither was he some kind of collector that got passionate over a certain something. Although he wasn’t completely indifferent about women, he didn’t ogle any other women but his wife Aura, and even rejected concubines with all his might.

“I have no means to soothe him with If I actually were to anger him. Nonetheless, an impaired relationship with him will affect the country greatly. Now, is it really such a strange thing to fear putting someone like that off?”

“No. Forgive me, my remark was out of line.”

The secretary honestly apologized to the glaring Queen.

“Well then, what is on the agenda today? It strikes me that I ought to reply to a petition from the eastern nobles?”

Done with the chit-chat, Aura tried to get into business mode, but

Secretary Fabio

“Not quite. That was originally planned, but a ‘Small Flying Dragon’ arrived this morning from General Puyol, who is on the way to subjugate the Pack Dragons on the Salt Road. Please look through it first.”

corrected her and placed four small envelopes containing thin dragonskin parchments onto her desk.

The messages of the “Small Flying Dragons” were usually all the same, but she still had to read them just in case.

“General Puyol contacted us with ‘Small Flying Dragons’? Then something unexpected must have happened.”

Aura clicked her tongue reflexively and took one of the envelopes with a gloomy face. Once she had opened it, she read through it.

“…..”

As a result, she screw up her face sullen.

“Your Highness? Bad news, as you expected?”

She heaved a sigh in reaction to his question.

“Yes. Bad news indeed.

Puyol Guillén failed to subjugate the Pack Dragons. Or more precisely, they fought a battle and he concluded that they are undermanned for the task, so he is requesting reinforcements.”

“Oh no…”

When the secretary was clued in on it, he narrowed his eyes to slits and was astounded on a very rare occasion.

Still, his reaction was understandable.

Puyol Guillén was leading the elite troops “Dragonback Archery Knights”. And to think they failed to subjugate mere carnivore

dragons. Any resident of this country would doubt his ears when hearing that.

Aura tapped the small dragonskin parchment in her hand and shrugged her shoulders a bit.

“If it is true what is written here, then it is not his fault. I would have requested reinforcements under these circumstances, too.”

“It has some weight to it if you are both saying that. Well, do I arrange for reinforcements?”

“Yes. Prepare them for a large-scale hunt. Anyone with experience will do, but prioritize numbers. Still, we cannot afford to lose a single soldier right now.

So we should send supply wagons and supplies abundantly in order to ease the burden on the soldiers even for a bit.”

“That will costs us dearly.”

“I know, but it is necessary.”

Secretary Fabio kept quiet for a moment upon her answer, but before long, he accepted.

“Very well. Anyway, I would really like to hear the details later on. I cannot believe that a simple subjugation of carnivore dragons has gotten so large-scale.”

“You said it. The phrase ’wishful thinking’ has never been so right on the money as now. What a harsh world we live in.”

Saying so, Aura heaved a sigh as if she was exhaling deeply.

Extra Stories about the Waiting Maids and their Master: The Mutual Assistance

The working conditions of the waiting maids in the Inner Palace of the Carpa Kingdom actually counted as more than manageable.

Okay, the amount of maids working there was a bit insufficient for the size of the palace, but they only had to serve Zenjirou and Aura, so the workload for each maid was never too much. (Recently, the new resident Prince Carlos Zenkichi called for a lot of attention, but the wet nurse Cassandra was mainly taking care of him and the waiting maids were simply assisting her, so it didn't actually increase their workload by much.)

On top of that, they hardly ever received any sudden tasks, since Queen Aura was practically never present during the day and Zenjirou preferred to be left alone, however weird that may be for nobility in this world.

Of course there was a lot to be done on a daily basis, such as preparing three meals, cleaning every room and the bath as well as tending to the garden, but they almost didn't have to worry about being "pushed around by their master", something they normally had to be prepared for when serving nobility or royalty, so they could take it relatively easy.

Still, that didn't mean it was roses all the way.

Naturally there were down sides to having Zenjirou, a man from a different world, as their master, too.

One very good example would be that the "business hours" went up.

Born and raised in modern Japan, Zenjirou was used to have light by flipping a switch, so his nights lasted longer. Needless to say, Zenjirou was always considerate to his surroundings, so he made

sure not to stay up too late unless it was absolutely necessary.

Nevertheless, his habit of staying up late (albeit only up to ten or eleven o'clock at night at best) showed no signs of changing, because he had brought a source of light in form of various LED floor lamps and a domestic hydropower generator with him.

As an unavoidable consequence, some of the waiting maids had to remain on stand-by for him.

Although he rarely did call for their services, the maids were not allowed to ignore their awake master and go to bed by themselves.

On the basis of a shift schedule, a few maids had to wait patiently in the antechamber "just in case" until Zenjirou went to sleep.

The result was that the young waiting maids developed the same bad habit of "staying up late" as Zenjirou.

It goes without saying that the effect of a bad habit did leave its mark on the "three troublemakers" Fay, Dolores and Rethe as well.

Late at night in the Carpa Kingdom. Or to say it in the terms of modern Japan: The timeframe, where eleven-years-old complained when you told them to go to sleep.

A faint light and bustle could be picked up from the private room of the "three troublemakers".

Even in the Inner Palace, the private chambers of Zenjirou, meaning the living and bed room, were the only places with electricity.

Hence it was usually an oil pan on a tall stand that illuminated the rooms of the waiting maids from a corner.

The flickering flame of the burning oil was somewhat lacking, but their rooms weren't all that big to begin with, so it shed light on the outlines of the entire room at least.

Inside such a dimly lit room, the three troublemakers were each enjoying their own way of "staying up late".

“Good, just three more holes. If I get a Birdie now, I might get to break Zenjirou-sama’s record…!”

A petite girl with short curled black hair lay face down on a simple wooden bed and fiddled with the portable game console, looking all serious. Her name was Fay.

Although she was merrily kicking the bed as she lay there, her gaze directed at the game console was the seriousness incarnate.

Nevertheless, it wouldn‘t be accurate to describe this scene as „serious“, considering she was snacking „banana chips“ from a wooden plate next to her arm while she was engrossed in the game.

On a related note, Fay was currently playing on a non-collapsible game console with only one screen. It was a different device from the one she had played the drop down or cart race games on before. The girls hadn‘t chosen this game console on their own.

It had been Zenjirou, who shared the console with them.

“Damn, these girls are getting really good. At this rate my snacks will vanish in an instant.”

Apparently that had been his reasoning.

In that case, he could just stop giving out “rewards”, but the fact that he didn’t do that was prove that he, too, enjoyed the game competition with the maids.

Incidentally, all his snacks with a relative short shelf life such as the smarties or regular cookies had already been eaten up by the royal couple themselves or else the “three troublemakers”.

The reward Zenjirou had prepared right now were the canned chocolate or biscuits from his emergency pack and as soon as these were consumed, he no longer had any snacks from his world.

Unaware of these circumstances, Fay simply remained true to her desire and competition spirit as she tried to beat his score.

The light from the display of the game console enlightened her face

from below and was reflected in her two prominent big black eyes.

She pressed her small lips together and waited for the right timing to press the button. As a result,

“Argh, no. Why? The wind? Are you kidding me?”

At the crucial point, Fay made a brilliant miss swing out of bonds and forgot that it was currently night, flapping her legs and raising a scream.

“Hey, Fay! Be quiet! Do you want to get into trouble again?”

Her roommate, a tall woman, raised a sharp voice. Her name was Dolores.

On both sides of this room were the private rooms of other waiting maids. Staying up late was frowned upon, so when one of the other maids, who had probably already went to sleep, complained, they would come out on the short end.

“Sorry. But if that had happened to you, you would’ve screamed out too! Man, a Birdie here and I might’ve broken Zenjirou-sama’s record!”

Although she apologized at once and lowered her voice, Fay still kicked her legs frustrated and grunted. So Dolores got up from her own bed and looked at the console in Fay’s hands.

“Oh, your score was that good? Wait, you’re still using that fat male character? No wonder your swings are forking off. That guy got no control. And I told you to use the blonde female character.”

“But he shoots the farthest… Uhh…”

The petite waiting maid with the short hair was seemingly giving herself a challenge already and together with the tall waiting maid with long hair, they continued to discuss the game.

“You’re too obsessed with the high score. When you’re playing on a course with hazards or fairways with out of bonds left and right, you have to play safe. Your score will be more solid when you only

attack on safe fairways."

"Still, my score always gets ruined by bad control, no matter how safe I play it. I can be as cautious in the first half as I possibly can and it still comes to naught when I miss a swing in the latter half. So I might as well go on the offence right from the very beginning."

"That's because you're only favouring range and use a character that has bad control."

Fay admitted her usual lack of patience, whereas Dolores gave a weary response.

Meanwhile not even Dolores noticed that she was changing in various ways by getting in touch with the culture of a different world at the hands of the game.

The counting system in golf was a bit peculiar to begin with. A par scored 0, a bogey 1 and a birdie -1. The player with the lowest total score in the end won the game.

Needless to say, the game console calculated the score automatically. But apparently the three troublemakers had learned to calculate the golf score by themselves, albeit vaguely, while they witnessed the up and downs in their scores during their gameplay.

At the same time that meant that they were beginning to understand the concepts of "zero" and "negative".

Having said that, the girls had no idea how valuable the knowledge was that they were obtaining now.

"Aw, I knew I would fail. Damn, so frustrating. If not for that mistake earlier, it really might have worked out!"

Having finished the game, Fay plunged her head into her pillow while still holding onto the game console with both hands.

"Oh, you done?"

"Ya…"

She muttered sloppily into her pillow, probably feeling down from her defeat.

“Well, then turn off the ‘power’ or it’ll go to waste, since Rethe isn’t back yet.”

“Oh, right. It’s her turn next.”

The declaration from Dolores made Fay turn only her head towards her and speak to her.

“Hey, Dolores.”

Just from the sugar-coated voice of her little roommate, Dolores knew what she was going to say and quickly snatched the game console from Fay’s hands.

“Nope. Abide the order.”

“Aw? Oh, come on. I’ll give it back as soon as Rethe comes back.”

Dolores slapped away the hands that reached out greedily from atop of Fay’s bed.

“I said no. I know you all too well. If I were to allow that now, you would say ‘Give me a moment. Only one more hole. One more and I’ll be done, so wait a sec.’ and ultimately play until the end.

And since Rethe is a good girl, she’ll forgive you with smile.”

While the two of them were conversing like that, a cornered, yet unhasting voice resounded from beyond the door of the room as if she had waited for the right timing.

“Fay-chan, Dolores-chan, open up~ My hands are occupied~”

“See, she’s back.”

“Fine. We’re coming, Rethe.”

Dolores and Fay quickly got up from their beds and trotted over to the door in order to let their other roommate inside.

* * *

“Puh, that was heavy. Thanks, Fay-chan, Dolores-chan.”

The waiting maid with drooping eyes and big breasts sat down on her own bed after Fay and Dolores took the plentiful luggage off her. Her name was Rethe.

“Don’t mention it. You worked hard on your extra shift already. Must have been tough.”

“Wow! Presents!? That’s our Vanessa-sama! Hey, Rethe, can I have some?”

Putting the silver alcohol jug and wooden plate from Rethe down on the table in the corner of the room, Fay raised the lid on the wooden plate of her own accord and exclaimed joyful.

“Watch it, Fay! You’re being impudent.”

“Haha, I do not mind. Let us eat it all together. Ah, Dolores-chan, the silver jug is filled with the self-made alcohol from Zenjirou-sama. We are to give our impressions on it after we drink it.”

Dolores reprimanded Fay, but Rethe just smiled softly as always.

The waiting maids usually worked in a team of three, but the reason why Rethe had been doing work by herself until late at night was that the Cooking Department Head Vanessa had asked her to help out.

The young waiting maids in the current cooking shift were all kind of bad at cooking. Moreover, an unfortunate occurrence overlapped with their shift: The menu for tomorrow was so elaborate that they had to start preparing for it tonight.

Due to that, Rethe had been called in as an emergency assistance, since she had the greatest skills amongst the young maids.

“Overtime compensation” didn’t exist in the Carpa Kingdom yet, so it was practically “unpaid work”, but the “helpers” in the Cooking Department had an advantage over the other departments, because

they got to take back some presents like this.

“Wait, alcohol? From Zenjirou-sama?”

Truth be told, Dolores had the biggest weakness for alcohol amongst the three of them, so she leaned forward attentively when she heard Rethe.

“Yes, but it is made entirely new, so it is possible that it turned out bad. If it tastes weird when we drink it, he wants us to stop at once. And he wants to hear our impression on it afterwards～”

The silver jug was filled with “liqueur”, the recent project from Zenjirou.

The base for it was the self-made distilled liquor. Since he had brought along an electronic distillery with an automated temperature control function, it was relatively easy to make distilled liquor, but merely distilled, the alcohol concentration was fairly high and not suited for drinking like that.

Hence he had improved the taste by adding fruit juice to it like a cocktail, or added it to other alcoholic drinks to boost their alcohol concentration. His newest achievement was this liqueur.

A lot of people in Japan pursued the making of liqueurs such as plum liqueur as a hobby.

Its manufacture wasn’t all that difficult. You took the high alcohol-containing distilled liquor, added the right amount of fruits and sugar to it and sealed it hermetically. Then you let it stand in a cold, dark place for at least one month and it was basically done.

Normally, the recipe for plum liqueur often included “shuuchou”, “plums” and “rock sugar”, but needless to say, these didn’t exist in this world, so he had substituted it with his “self-made distilled liquor”, “a lemon-like fruit” and “granulated sugar”.

On the evidence of bringing a distillery with him, Zenjirou had intended to make alcohol in this world from the very beginning, thus he had also saved a couple of homepages from the internet that introduced instructions on how to make liqueurs.

However, he had no way to determine the exact alcohol concentration in his self-made distilled liquor (since he didn't bring an alcoholimeter), so he was still stuck in the trial-and-error stage.

Anyway, he had tried to be extra carefully when he sterilised the container with boiling water beforehand, washed and cut the fruits under running water and sealed it hermetically, all in order to avoid getting germs into it, but there was no way to tell if he had succeeded in doing so.

Drinking that trial-and-error alcohol actually signified that they were "testing it for food poisoning" rather than having a taste of it, but most of the waiting maids, starting with Dolores, were surprisingly eager to try it.

As a rule, Dolores usually just tagged along with the "troublemaker group", but this time she took the initiative to get things started.

The private rooms of the waiting maids were by no means large, considering they shared it in sets of three.

"Okay, Fay, I'm going to move the table, so put the stuff on it away for a moment."

"Roger that!"

"Can you manage, Dolores-chan? Or do you need help?"

Saying so, Rethe was about to stand up, but Dolores stopped her with a wave of her hand.

"No problem. It's easier to do it myself, since it's dark and narrow here."

Just as she had said, she smoothly moved the small table to between their beds.

She had to fumble around a bit, since it was dim, but she seemed to remember the positions of all the furniture, so she got the job done in not time and without a hitch.

"Good, this should do. Fay, you can put the stuff back on it. I'm

going to fetch some cups for the alcohol."

"'Kay. Oh, I still have some banana chips left over from earlier, so I'll put them down, too."

"Yeah, sure… Wait, you were eating on the bed again!? I told you to stop doing that, because the crumbs get into the sheets!"

"Sorry, sorry."

Scolded by Dolores, Fay showed no sign of guilt as she jumped onto her bed and gave it a wipe with her hands.

"Don't wipe it! What are you throwing it onto the floor for!? That will attract the mouses!"

"Dolores-chan, you are begin too loud."

A worried Rethe cautioned Dolores, who yelled inadvertently, with a slightly faster way of speaking than usual.

The angry outburst from Dolores had been rather loud, but fortunately no one from next door came over to complain.

With all the preparations done, the three waiting maids sat down on the beds in place of chairs and reached out for the food or alcohol on the table as they please.

"Hmm… It does not seem to smell weird at least."

After pouring some of the liqueur from the silver jug into a wooden cup, Dolores held the cup under her nose and sniffed at it carefully.

Of course she was being cautious, since she was going to intake an unknown alcohol drink in the dark.

Thereafter she brought the cup to her mouth and put out her tongue, dipping only its tip into the liquid.

"Hmm…"

"How is it, Dolores-chan?"

“Does it have a weird taste?”

Dolores screwed up her face a bit, whereupon Rethe and Fay looked at her worried.

Shaking her head wordlessly, Dolores then

“No, it’s safe, I guess. Doesn’t taste weird at all. But instead it’s super sweet. At the same time it’s somewhat sour, so it’s not exactly undrinkable, but not really my cup of tea.”

offered a clear opinion.

“Right, you prefer your alcohol to be bitter~”

“Lemme see… Wow, this is good. I like it. Or rather, this is the best alcohol I’ve ever drunk!”

After hearing Dolores out, Fay drank from her own cup and immediately showed a delighted expression.

“Yeah, figures. You do love sweet stuff. But be careful. This alcohol is actually pretty strong.”

“No prob, no prob.”

“Why do I even bother… You already emptied the cup.”

Fay was the opposite of Dolores and loved sweet things, so she seemingly took quite a fancy to it. Emptying the first cup with one gulp, she reached out for the silver jar at once, pouring herself another cup.

On the other hand, Dolores and Rethe were sipping it at best and snacking on the food in the meantime.

“Are these pickled leaf vegetables? Not a bad choice for a snack to the alcohol.”

“Yes, and these are meat and vegetables on a stick. I got the leftovers, seasoned them with salt and spices, then roasted them. They turned out really good~”

“Hmm, by itself it certainly is good, but it doesn’t really work in combination with the sweet alcohol. In my opinion, the pickled stuff is a better match.”

“Is that so. Too bad. Okay, I will try to come up with a seasoned snack that suits the sweet alcohol.”

Rethe was quite over-ambitious when it came to cooking, so she wasn’t offended by Dolores’ rejection and immediately mused about the next dish while she ate one of the sticks she had made by herself.

“Oh, gimme one, too. …Wow, this is good! Really good, Rethe. Dolores is just all bark no bite. She can’t even make anything good herself.”

“Same goes for you, Fay.”

“But unlike you, I won’t nitpick over stuff that other people made. I’ll eat it happily.”

“That’s just because you’re an omnivore. And that’s nothing to be proud of. Well, you might be contended with it, though.”

As always, their conversation sounded like a quarrel, but the pitch of their voices was a positive one that could only be described as harmonious.

“Geez, Fay-chan, Dolores-chan, stop fighting and enjoy the food.”

Although Rethe was reprimanding them, it didn’t sound real either, as she was aware of the circumstances.

“Relax. I’m eating, see. Hmm, everything gone already? I can’t see well in the dark. Oh right, Dolores, I’m going to borrow this for a bit.”

Scrabbling about in the deep, wooden plate with the pickled vegetables, Fay suddenly remembered something, got onto Dolores’ bed and picked up the game console that lay next to the pillow with her left hand.

“Good, now I can see.”

She inspected the inside of the plate after she had turned on the portable game console, whereas Dolores pulled a weary face.

“I do hope you didn’t touch that with the same hand you used to pick the food up. That belongs to Zenjirou-sama, we have only borrowed it.”

“Duh. I always eat with my right hand and only used my left hand right now.”

Although she did appear to be presumptuous, Fay was still a full-fledged waiting maid of the Inner Palace. She made sure never to cross the line, albeit treading on it sometimes.

Even when she had played the game while snacking the banana chips on top of the bed before Rethe had come back, she had put a damped cloth on the side, using it to wipe her oily and salty fingertips every time before touching the game console again.

“Mm, it’s really empty. What a shame.”

“Well, we have been eating it with the three of us.”

“Haha, it is better not to eat too much before going to bed, Fay-chan.”

“Oh, speaking of, we should really go to bed soon. What time is it, Fay?”

Asked by Dolores, Fay skilfully operated the game console with just her left hand.

“Wait, ehm, three minutes past nine.”

She read the displayed Arabic numbers quite naturally, announcing the current time.

At some point, the three troublemakers had adapted to the twenty-two hour clock. It might merely be a matter of time until they started to say “just five more minutes” in the morning.

“Oh God, we really ought to go to bed then. Let’s tidy up and sleep. We have the gardening shift starting tomorrow.”

With these words, Dolores slowly got up from the bed when Rethe suddenly exclaimed squealing.

“Aw, I forgot! I hate gardening work!”

Their shifts were divided into four major domains on a rotating basis: Quarters, kitchen, bath and garden. Needless to say, each waiting maid had her strengths and weaknesses.

Rethe was the best cook amongst the young waiting maids, but in exchange she was all thumbs for gardening. Or rather, she was generally unfit for work, because she was the “clumsy” type. Her cooking skills should be seen as an exception.

“No worries. I’ll cover for you, Rethe.”

While Rethe whined on top of her bed face down, so that her huge breasts were squished, Fay comforted her softly in the course of tidying up the room.

Despite her petite form, Fay was actually overflowing with stamina and energy, so she had no problem with garden work.

“Well, I’ll step in, too, when I’m free.”

Except for a small shortcoming in cooking, Dolores managed all the other work pretty well, so gardening wasn’t a “weakness” as it was for Rethe, but she did “hate” it.

It was just like her to prepare an escape route by saying “when I’m free”, because she wanted to do as little as possible for this job.

“Yes, thanks! In exchange, I am going to do my best when we have the cooking shift again～”

Instead of scrutinizing the motive of her roommate, Rethe honestly expressed her gratitude.

* * *

The gardening shift.

This job was more or less evaluated into two extreme categories by the waiting maids. Namely into either the “best” or the “worst” of all their jobs. On an related note, the waiting maids deeming it to be the “worst” were overall a majority, whereas those deeming it to be the “best” were a minority.

The reason that made it the “worst” was actually quite simple: Compared the other jobs, the gardening shift was an incredible tough job.

Cooking in front of the stove during the cooking shift was admittedly hot, but nowhere near the heat you exposed yourself to when pulling up weeds in the garden during the hottest season.

And although the bath was big enough to give you a headache when scrubbing it, it didn’t even compare to the size of the lawn that you had to tend to in the garden.

Thus, the gardening shift was a strenuously task, even compared to the other appointments.

Why then did some of the waiting maids consider it the “best” job, albeit being a minority?

The reason for that was extremely simple as well: It had less working hours.

As a cooking staff, they had to stand in the kitchen in accordance with the three meals.

During the bath shift, they had to do the laundry in the morning when the weather was good, and in the evening, they had to put more wood on the fire to keep the water in the bath at the right temperature.

And although the cleaning itself was done relatively quickly, the cleaning crew had to be on stand-by for the rest of the day in case their master suddenly called for their services.

Compared to that, the working hours of the waiting maids on

gardening duty were extremely short. That was nothing out of the ordinary.

The sun of the Carpa Kingdom was not something you could overcome with just attitude or guts. Then again, they couldn't really wait for the sun to set to start with the garden work.

As a result, the working hours of the gardening shift were limited to a relative short timeframe: Principally from dawn till midday and from evening till dusk.

So they started early, but got a long break before they called it a day early, too. Considering only the actual working hours, it definitely was an immensely favourable task.

Despite that however, the majority of the maids claimed it to be the "worst" job, so it was all too easy to imagine just how tough the assigned duty during that short period was.

In regards to the "three troublemakers", Dolores and Rethe belonged to the majority faction, whereas Fay belonged to the minority one.

"The grass has really grown around here. Today we will be focussing on cutting it."

The loud and firm voice of Emilia, the Gardening Department Head, resounded over the courtyard that was bathed in the only just rising morning sun.

"Okay!"

"Understood!"

"Yes, very well."

Fay, Dolores and Rethe replied with an unusual loud voice.

That could be attributed to Emilia's policy as the department head.

She was not a noble from the Carpa Kingdom, but an ordinary middle-aged woman.

Her hair was long and black, her skin brown and her stomach had put on a weight appropriate for her age.

It would be wrong to call her “fat”, though. If anything, she was strongly-built.

To put it bluntly, she was a corpulent woman of middle age.

Nevertheless she still moved about agilely, not showing her age.

Equipped with a thick glove on her right hand and a small one-handed sickle in the other hand, Emilia squatted down on the spot and started to cut the grass first of all in order to set a pattern for the young waiting maids.

Fay and the others quickly took their sickles and squatted down as well.

“…..”

The morning sun was already developing its destructive force, casting long shadows from the girls, who had started to cut the grass in silence, onto the lawn.

About one hour later.

“Ugh… I cannot carry on.”

The temperature in the courtyard suddenly skyrocketed when the morning sun revealed itself. Unsurprisingly enough it was Rethe, who threw in the towel first.

Still crouched down, she dropped the sickle, straightened herself and repetitively hit her back with her fist.

In reaction to bending her back rearward, the sweat from her forehead dripped onto her chin and then ran into her cleavage.

Since they were working outside, they were wearing thick veils on their heads as a protection against the sunlight, but its effect only amounted to “better than nothing”.

“So you’re not good with the sickle, Rethe. Even though the kitchen knife is like an extension of your arm.”

“Fay-chan, this is not a problem of how I use the sickle…”

Hanging her head crestfallen, Rethe replied like that to her petite co-worker, who was helping her quite energetically with the sickle in her assigned area.

Her stamina ran out before the technique even became a problem.

Rethe had a stiff body to begin with, so she had trouble working crouched for a long time. Moreover, she fell over extremely often whenever she cut the grass, because her huge breasts upset her balance, which was already impaired from her poor motor skills. On top of that, she was a little, just a tiny bit heavier than the other young maids, so her knees started to hurt when she squatted down.

In line with this, she was insomuch incompatible with garden work that you might as well call it her nemesis.

“How pathetic. And you still call yourself the daughter of a knight?”

Not pausing her work, Emilia gave Rethe a harsh tongue-lashing without turning around to her.

“Y- You are right. My apologies, Emilia-sama!”

Rethe trembled with fear and quickly picked up the sickle she had dropped before. But still out of breath, Emilia called out to her again before she could resume her work.

“Hold it, Rethe. Tell me, were you slacking off? Or were you taking a break, because you were exhausted?”

“Huh? Eh?”

“Answer me.”

Sweating like a pig, Rethe ripped her dry tongue down from her palatal in order to answer the question.

“N- No! I was not slacking off. I am really worn out.”

“Then do not be shy and take a proper rest in the shade.

Ditching work is beyond all question and failure is not an option, but neither is overstraining yourself. It will cause a lot more trouble when you pass out from overworking yourself.”

For better or worse, Superior Emilia took the view that “one has to give everything they got”.

So she was merciless towards slackers and expected people with insufficient skills to improve themselves. In the same way, she expected them to make the best of their imperfect skills. And anyone, who tried to work beyond their capabilities, was admonished by her.

That read well by itself, but it was hell for those, who had troubles with a task.

When they made a mistake, they were scolded harshly. And when they tried to make up for that mistake by overstraining themselves, they were scolded even worse. So anyone with a sensitive nature would curl up and be unable to move anymore.

Having said that, Rethe wasn’t a girl with such a delicate spirit.

“Yes, excuse me then.”

Being told to rest in a harsh tone of voice, Rethe showed a blooming smile and retreated into the shade of a tree, almost crawling off the grassland.

* * *

“The sun is up so high it is becoming perilous. Let us stop for now.”

The declaration to end the morning shift was met with unanimous approval.

Each utterance varied slightly, though.

“Yes~ …We are finally done~”

“Puh, that was a heavy going.”

“Yay, it’s over! Good, now I can play all I want until evening!”

Rethe and Dolores slumped down as if their puppet strings had been cut. In spite of that, the overly energetic Fay jumped around happily all by herself.

“Oh, reminds me, Zenjirou-sama said we can use the ‘soccer ball’ in our free time. Wanna play, Dolores, Rethe?

Their colleague with short black hair turned around with a smile that seemed to say that she had a flash of wit just now, yet Dolores had sought refuge in the shade of the tree by lying down and answered with a husky voice without getting up from the grass.

“Nah, play by yourself…”

As for Rethe, she apparently didn’t even have the power to reply anymore.

“…..”

She shook her head weakish without saying anything, barely communicating her refusal.

“Okay. Then I’ve got it all to myself, yahoo!”

Fay rushed inside the building to get the soccer ball.

“She can’t be human… She must be half dragon or something…”

“Haha… You may be right…”

Dolores practically coughed up her words and Rethe agreed to it with a wry smile after she had recovered enough to speak again.

The hotter the weather was the more active large reptiles, such as the poikilotherm dragons, got. Of course there was a limit to it, since they were organic creatures, but at the very least the

temperatures of the hottest season on the South Continent were nowhere near that limit.

No wonder that these indigenous creatures prevailed on the South Continent. They adapted way better to their environment than humans, who were nothing but an adventives species.

Underneath the brutal sun of that very South Continent, Fay was lifting the soccer ball in her miniskirt maid dress after she had fetched it on her own. That scene was so bizarre that one definitely questioned whether she was a genuine human or a cross-breeding with a dragon.

“1, 2, 3, 4! Bam!”

“Hey… Fay-chan, I can see your undies.”

“It’s not one bit erotic, though.”

Instead of juggling it, Fay rather made a jumping kick at the end while Rethe and Dolores leaned seated against the trunk of the tree and watched over her dumbstruck.

“Oh my, how pitiful. I am not telling you to be like Fay, but do you not think you should enjoy your youth some more?”

The owner of this gentle voice with a sour undertone was Emilia, who suddenly stood next to Rethe and Dolores.

Her harsh way of speaking during work had made a complete about-turn into one that oozed kindness and benevolence.

No one else from the department heads separated business and private as distinct as Emilia.

In a strict sense, neither the break time, nor the nighttime peace were completely private, because the waiting maids of the Inner Palace had an omniferous live-in employment, so a more accurate description would be that she “was as kind as possible when she wasn’t issuing instructions”.

“You will not recover when all you do is lie there. Here, some

drinks.”

Saying so, Emilia held out the large silver water carafe from the refrigerator in the living room and some wooden cups.

The water carafe contained water mixed with black sugar and extremely sour fruit juice.

It was the perfect drink for a time like this, because it simultaneously replenished your requirements of both water and calorie while the sourness made it easier to swallow.

Simply put, it was a primitive sports drink.

“Yay! All hail to Emilia-sama! She knows her stuff!”

The very first one to grab a cup and hold it up like asking for a refill was Fay, who had been playing with the ball on the other side just a moment ago.

“When did you…”

Dolores glared at her petite co-worker with half-closed eyes.

“Sure, sure, there is enough for all of you, so no cutting in line. One after another.”

Still smiling gently, Emilia flicked Fay’s forehead with her index finger to make her stand back, then she sat down in the shade, holding down her skirt in the course of it.

“Here. Be careful not to choke on it.”

With these words, she poured the young waiting maids the drink into their wooden cups from the silver water carafe.

“Puh…”

“Hah…”

“That hit the spot…”

All three of them downed the cup in one gulp.

The cold water with a temperature of under ten degree Celsius could only be experienced inside the Inner Palace and during the hottest season of the Carpa Kingdom it really soothed a parched throat.

“Yum! One more!”

When Fay vigorously showcased her cup, Emilia refilled it with a soft smile.

“Sure.”

“Emilia-sama, may I ask for a refill as well?”

“Why, yes, of course. Just be careful not to upset your stomach.”

Emilia happily acted as a waitress for the young waiting maids, who sat on the grass and held up their cups in quick succession.

The water carafe was empty in no time. The effect was that even the completely burned out Rethe had recovered enough to smile brightly like always again.

Having said this, the three were sweating like crazy all over their bodies, because they had taken in a large amount of water all at once after their bodies were directly heated up by the sunlight, so they practically looked as if water had been poured over their heads.

The hair of the young waiting maids was glinting blazingly and their clothes had become so drenched that its colour was changing. Noticing that,

“Once you have calmed down, go take a meal inside. But before that, wash off your sweat in the bath and change your clothes. Ines would give you hell if she saw you walking around inside the building like that.”

Emilia made sure to caution them with a smile.

Taking a bath and changing clothes during work hours.

At a glance, that sounded a bit too luxurious, even for the maids of the Inner Palace, but instead of a privilege, it was actually more like a duty for them.

Zenjirou was forgiving towards a lot of things, but when it came to hygiene, he became a different person, so much that you might call him obstinate by the standards of the Carpa Kingdom.

And that didn’t just apply to himself. He would find it unpleasant when the waiting maids that lived in the same palace were reeking of sweat. In spite of that however, he hated the small of perfume even more, so it was a troublesome issue.

Of course Zenjirou would never allow himself to show that disgust, much less mention it, but the waiting maids were professionals in that regard.

Now that they had spent a lot of time with him, they noticed that he was actually “stomaching” it.

Consequently, the maids had assumed the habit to always take a bath and change into new clothes whenever they had worked up a sweat.

* * *

The pompous and ridiculous long midday break for a maid came to an end after they bathed, changed clothes, ate and took a nap. Once the rays of sunshine weakened a bit, the evening shift started.

“This shall do for the trimming. Now we just have to collect the green waste and dispose of it. After that we will water the lawn. Understood?”

“Yes!”

“Yes.”

“Yes~”

Just like flipping a switch, Emilia was showing a strict expression once again. The three young maids replied with the same word, said with individual intonations.

Energetic for Fay, calm and indifferent for Dolores and somewhat drawn-out for Rethe. The individuality in their answers could also be applied to their working habits.

Fay rushed over to the rakes that were as tall as herself at full speed and started to sweep up the grass they had cut in the morning. In contrast to that, Dolores cunningly went to fetch the handcart and bags for transporting the green waste, because that was the easiest task.

“E- Ehm…”

Rethe on the other hand had missed out on the starting signal and was looking around nervously.

“What are you doing, Rethe? If you have time to look around, go fetch a rake, too, and sweep up the grass. And you still call yourself the daughter of a knight?”

“Yes, I am sorry!”

Scolded at once, Rethe ran off with a late start.

On a related note, the majority of the noble families in the Carpa Kingdom had a knight as the head of the family, but not every noble family was necessarily like that. Rethe's family was actually one of these few exceptions, but it would be pointless to address it now.

Emilia would only retort with "You better work these hands if you have time to make excuses. And you still call yourself the daughter of a knight?", even if Rethe were to clarify it now.

"Ah, Rethe, start from the other side."

"Okay, I will."

Fay and Rethe swept the ground with their rakes and gathered the green waste. It was a surprisingly tough job, but since Emilia was keeping a close watch while she was also wielding a rake close by, it would amount to suicide if they slacked off.

When they were sweeping up the green waste, they had to be careful not to dig over the ground unnecessarily, so they were sweating all over their bodies in no time after a few strokes.

Then Dolores arrived with the handcart loaded with large hemp bags.

"Here you go. I'll start with this pile."

She grasped the pile of grass with both hands, which were covered by thick gloves, and stuffed it into a bag.

Once she had filled three bags with grass, she put these bags back onto the handcart.

" Okay, I'll go throw this away."

"Be quick and do not dawdle along."

"Yes."

Giving a short reply, Dolores pushed the cart laden with three large bags and headed towards one corner of the courtyard.

This handcart, too, originally belong to Zenjirou. He had bought it to transport the domestic hydropower generator for when he crossed over to this world.

It was convenient to move around large or heavy things, but Zenjirou was hardly ever doing any physical work in this world. Therefore he was generally loaning it to the waiting maids in order to make the best of it.

In fact, the handcart was a real blessing for the maids in the Inner Palace, because they even had to deal with physical jobs by themselves.

Supervisory Maid Amanda had been convinced by its utility insomuch that she had discussed it with the passing merchants whether something similar could be mass-produced.

And because the construction of the handcart was hardly anything complicated, it would surely be possible to reproduce it, even with the craftsmen of this world.

In the meantime, Dolores had made a couple of round trips with the handcart, carrying all the bags stuffed with grass to the waste disposal site. The sun was already sinking in the west, bathing the vicinity in a red sunset.

“Well done. All that is left is to water the lawn and we better hurry, because we will not see where we have watered it already once the sun has set.”

“Yes!”

“…Okay.”

“Yes～”

Fay showed no sign of her energy running out any time soon. Dolores flaunted her exhaustion, even though she had done the easiest task. And Rethe had already depleted the stamina she had recovered during the break. Thus each of them replied with a different tension.

The finishing touch of the garden work was the “watering”. It was a painful job that took its toll on the exhausted body.

After all, this world didn’t know of aqueducts or water hoses, much less watering cans.

Therefore they had to scatter the water around with a ladle after they scooped it with a bucket.

A little ray of hope was that they were allowed to scoop the water directly from the fountain basin in the middle of the courtyard. Thanks to that, they didn’t have to walk all the way to the far off well.

“Heave-ho!”

“Hey, Fay! You spattered me with water!”

“Ah, sorry.”

Although Dolores was complaining about Fay’s wild swing, she wasn’t actually all that bothered about it.

Despite the evening time, it was still pretty hot, so it would dry soon anyway, even if she got wet. If anything, it actually felt good to be showered with the cold water.

Of course there was a trick to scattering the water with a ladle, but above all, it required muscle power.

“Heave… ho.”

Already past her limit, Rethe was more like “spilling” the water instead of “sprinkling” it.

“Rethe, if you are tired, then take your time. And be extra thorough with each swing instead. So disgraceful. And you still call yourself the daughter of a knight?”

“Yes, I am truly sorry…”

Her arm, as it held the full ladle, was shaking so much that you

even noticed it from a distant.

Dolores was almost reaching her limit as well, albeit not as bad as Rethe.

“Doesn’t Zenjirou-sama have some tools that make the watering easier…?”

She grumbled almost whispering, but Emilia didn’t let it slip during her work mode.

“Dolores, it truly is disgracing, when the daughter of a knight of all people depends on the belongings of her master to lighten her burden. Be ashamed of yourself.”

“! Yes, I very much apologize, Emilia-sama.”

Dolores cowered before her and apologized profusely on reflex, but unknown to her due to the nightfall, Emilia was, contrary to her scolding tone, actually looking preoccupied.

It goes without saying that the young waiting maids needed to improve their stamina and skills, but as a matter of fact, Emilia knew that the tasks in her department were putting quite the strain on the young waiting maids.

If that burden could be lightened at least a bit with some kind of tools, then it was worth considering.

(Maybe I should consult with Zenjirou-sama discreetfully once.)

Holding such a thought in her mind, Emilia swung her own ladle and continued to water the newly cut grass.

“Good job. Now we are done for today.”

The courtyard of the Inner Palace had been completely overtaken by darkness, when Emilia declared the end of work.

In reality, it would be more accurate to say that it had gotten too dark to continue working instead of calling it the end of the work day. The sun had already set so much that they could barely

perceive each other's silhouettes, recognizing any specific facial expressions was impossible.

"Yes, thank you for your guidance."

"Finally… done…"

Because of that Emilia only noticed that there was one silhouette missing when only Dolores and Rethe answered her.

There were one tall and one busty silhouette, but the tiny one was gone.

"Where is Fay?"

Emilia looked around restlessly and then an agitated voice resounded from behind her.

"I'm here, Emilia-sama. What's the matter?"

When she turned around, there stood a really small silhouette. One could only see the outlines, but it was clear that the silhouette aka. Fay was holding heavy buckets in both her hands.

Apparently she had been gone to fetch more water at the fountain just when Emilia had called it a day.

What bad timing.

With her work mode turned off after her announcement, Emilia now smiled somewhat apologetic while she

"Forgive me, Fay. We are already done for today."

offered her little subordinate an excuse in a gentle tone.

Fay's eyes were already quite big to begin with, but she widened them all the way to boot when she heard that, complaining loudly.

"EHH!? Then I got this water for nothing!"

"Sorry, but could you empty the bucket? If you do not want to return to the fountain, you can just scatter it around here."

“Ugh…”

Not even Fay, a bundle of energy, was able to tolerate that wasted effort. She exclaimed extremely displeased and put the buckets down with a bang.

“Well then, I will go on ahead. Please put away the tools orderly. Okay?”

With these words, Emilia disappeared into the darkness first.

“Yes…”

Fay responded absent-minded, but she had no intention to bring the bucket all the way back to the fountain. So she was left with no choice, but to get over it by scattering it randomly around here.

In the moment she grasped the ladle with this in mind,

“Sucks to be you. Well, good luck with the last buckets.”

Dolores called out to her with an obviously amused voice.

That voice was vivid insomuch that you could envision the smirk on her face as she mocked her, even in this darkness.

Fay plunged the ladle into the bucket and with a change of plan, she then struck out at the tall, supposedly laughing, silhouette with all her might.

“Yes, thanks!”

“KYAA!?”

It was too dark to see anything, but judging by that scream, she seemed to have succeeded with her plan to shower Dolores with water.

“Ah, sorry. Did I hit you? I can’t see well in the dark.”

“…..”

This time Dolores was rendered speechless by Fay’s affected

apology.

“You little!”

“Whoops!”

She made a dead set at her from beyond the darkness, but Fay dodged her splendidly with a side step while holding the ladle in one hand and the bucket in the other.

However, Dolores hadn’t been aiming at Fay. She secured the other bucket Fay had set down, scooped some water with a ladle as well and threw it at her tiny roommate as payback.

“Take this.”

“Wah!”

“Kyaa!? Sheesh, Dolores-chan, that is cold.”

Apparently the water did not just hit Fay, but also Rethe, who had slumped to the ground behind her.

“Ah, sorry, Rethe.”

Dolores stopped for a moment to apologize, but Fay wouldn’t be Fay if she let this opportunity slide.

“Got ya!”

The water smashed into Dolores’ face so hard that it was painful before it was cold.

“Now you’ve done it! You little shit!”

“Oops! Haha, I’m over here!”

Forgetting about their earlier fatigue, the two of them energetically engaged in a water fight.

Even though the sun had set already, it was still oppressively hot.

This being the case, it was anything but unpleasant to splash each

other with water, even if they were still wearing maid clothes.

“Sheesh. We have to tidy up quickly or Emilia-sama will be angry.”

That assessment was further backed by the fact that Rethe, too, wasn’t moving away while she reprimanded them worried, even though she was getting hit numerous times for a while now.

“Right. Then I’ll bet everything on this last shot!”

“Interesting. Bring it on.”

Fay tossed away the ladle and heaved the still half-full bucket with both hands, whereupon Dolores did the same and readied herself to attack.

“There!”

“Eat this!”

The tall and tiny maid duo splashed the remaining water into each other’s faces at the same time.